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AUTHORSHIP

A Guide to Literary Technique



AUTHORSHIP

A Guide to Literary Technique

By

A WELL-KNOWN AUTHOR

L O N D O N
LEONARD PARSONS

First Published 1922

Leonard Parsons, Limited

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AUTHORSHIP

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

AUTHORSHIP is an art.

It may also be the means of acquiring wealth, but whatever else it may or may not be, emphatically it is an art ; and therefore, within limitations it can be taught. When you come to examine a great piece of literature, a fine novel, a good story, or a convincing play, there is not, as many timid aspirants imagine, some terrible secret first to be unearthed. Of course luck plays its part in writing as in painting or trading or stockbroking : but, granted certain mental and temperamental endowments, there is no reason why there should not be far more and better novels, short stories and plays. Too often a clever, inexperienced writer has failed to attain, simply because of ignorance in technique. He does not know the very essentials of the literary art, and after a long series of failures, he has at last given up the contest and taken up some other career.

It is quite possible that thus a great loss has been incurred to literature. His fine, sensitive mind ; his fresh originality and wealth of ideas, have thus been prevented from finding their sphere of useful-

ness. He has written manuscript after manuscript, he has bombarded editors and publishers and others, but the fire has been returned with the same missiles. Finally, he has been overcome by despair : he cannot understand the reason for his failure, and anyway he is now sick of the whole subject. The root of the trouble is that the aspirant has not realised that he has no right to succeed until he has struggled to learn the rules of the art. It is an extraordinary fact that because every moderately educated person is supposed to know how to speak correctly and write a grammatical letter, he cannot realise that there is something else which has to be learnt before he can get deep down into the hearts of his readers and rouse their emotions.

And yet, just as you study painting before you can expect to place your ideas in pictorial form, so it is only reasonable that before you can expect to demand the attention of the public through the printed or spoken word, you ought at least to know how to do this. Every particular art has its rules, and yet art generally has certain fundamental rules which are applicable to all. That is why it so often happens that an artist in poetry is an artist in painting. A great actor may be a great musical composer, or a playwright a clever sculptor. Every artist has already in him the essential attributes well developed and ready for his other art ; and for him there is far less to be learnt than in the case of the aspirant who has never studied art of any kind, but just walked boldly into writing and been surprised that success was not ready to shake him by the hand at the first effort.

In this volume, then, we shall make it our study to find out what is the technique of the author's art in regard to fiction, using this in its broadest expression, and to show the rules which must be obeyed by him who expects to succeed. It is true, of course, that there are geniuses who are so richly endowed by nature that they can break every rule in their art and yet attain magnificently. These are the exceptions. It must not be forgotten, all the same, that technique is merely the means to an end. There is a danger in thinking so much of the manner of telling the story, that the story itself is lost sight of. In the history of painting, as soon as artists began to think more of their technique than of the subject, art began to decline. For whether you intend to be a great painter, novelist, poet, playwright, sculptor, or any other kind of artist, your aim will be to express great ideas, to show a knowledge of life well conceived and accurately observed.

Within you is the soul of the artist. You, being an artist, are sensitive to sounds and colours and contrasts which have failed to touch the average human. Being an artist, too, you have a keen, sympathetic, penetrative insight into the ways of human nature ; and you have as your essential endowment such a vivid imagination that it responds at once to the right note and is pained by anything out of tune. The result is that much more of life reaches you than ever touches the other man. Your whole nature by endowment and training ought to be such that you are able to present all this observation, all these human happenings in

such an entertaining form that the average man will not only be attracted, but will agree that your observation is accurate, that the characters are true to life and that by your skill you have been able to show him something of his fellow men and women which he himself had failed to notice.

The technique of the author has to be learnt merely in order that his means of addressing the reader may be the more efficient, just as an actor has to learn to say his lines in such a manner that they will 'get over' the footlights, across the intervening space into the emotional part of the audience's anatomy. It is the function of all art to appeal by means of the senses, and unless it rouses the emotions it is not good art. By illuminating certain characters acting in a certain manner, it adds to our greater knowledge of human nature ; it shows man to man, it reasons and sums up for us by indicating human cause and effect in regard to conduct. The effect of a certain law on a number of characters, for instance, was shown in Clemence Dane's successful play "A Bill of Divorcement." The author, by her observation, her understanding and study of human nature; her imagining of certain possible situations, was able to place before the average man and woman a knowledge of life, a piece of information, which you were compelled to take notice of because the appeal was made to your sense of pity, indignation, humour, surprise and other emotions. Finally you considered these characters and their actions in the light of reason ; but it was only because the author had arranged her situations and scenes, contrasted her characters,

idealised the colloquialisms and conversations of every day ; given the story a beginning, a middle and an end, exaggerated here and compressed there ; in other words, selected and arranged her observations into a work of art, made imaginative creatures live ; that you were compelled to listen, watch and think over one of life's problems. You came out of the theatre having not merely received emotional pleasure, but added to your knowledge : and that is the true aim of art.

Life does not work according to pattern ; so that is where the artist comes in. All art is selection, as has been said, but forgotten, many times. The patience of a reader or an audience is limited, and therefore a plain, straightforward story, exactly as it happened in real life, is quite impossible. The true artist can by instinct and training know which characteristics and which incidents and which words to select to bring about the greatest emotional appeal. A dull, unemotional book or play, without interesting characters doing interesting things, is a failure both artistically and financially. It is bad art because it makes no appeal to our senses, rouses no sympathetic interest, and for the same reasons no one is going to pay to be bored. Human people, and especially women, are always interested in the problems of humanity ; and the supreme test of good fiction is that it makes a deep, emotional appeal. If an author can only succeed in 'getting over' with his characters into the mind of the reader, causing them to demand and win sympathy or interest, he has as an artist begun to succeed. And the more profoundly he has

stirred the reader, the greater has been his success.

But this is more easily said than done. How does a painter who is depicting a very ordinary subject succeed in winning our admiration and even sending a thrill through our senses ? How did Shakespeare, merely by using the letters of the alphabet, manage to charm generations of people ? How does a pianist, by pressing only a limited number of ivory notes, rouse a room full of normal persons into a body of wild enthusiasts ? The answer is simply that each of these arranges his colours, his lights and shades, or his words, or his sounds in such a manner that they strike something corresponding in your senses. Arrangement : exactly ! That is the whole secret, if it is a secret. And provided you have imagination, you can learn how to use it ; provided you have a feeling for colour, lights, shades and sounds ; provided, above all, that you have a genuine reverence for nature, truth, sincerity, the nobility of your fellow humanity, and can feel deeply—you can acquire the technique which will enable you to convey all these sensations to the reader and thus make him feel as you have felt in considering these imaginative characters.

You cannot make a musician out of a person who has no ear for music, nor can you make a poet or a novelist out of one who has no artistic temperament. But the more sensitive he is in response to impressions, the easier it will be for him to learn the grammar of his art, and the discipline is as necessary in writing as it is elsewhere. For, all that technique consists of is that it shows us how to

select the essential from the non-essential, enabling us to systematise and simplify until we get a well-constructed, well-balanced whole, symmetrical in design and beautiful in its contemplation. And because writing is an art, let us now see what are the fundamental principles of all art, and then go on to elucidate those which are the special features of fiction-writing as seen in the modern expressions of the novel, short story, and drama of the theatre and cinema.

CHAPTER II

BASIC PRINCIPLES

WE have set out, then, to ascertain the rules which must be appreciated before our composition can expect to succeed. But where can we find laid down these general, basic principles that are common to all the arts ?

I believe that nowhere will you find this better expressed and summed up than by Ruskin in his *Elements of Drawing*. "Composition," he says, "means, literally and simply, putting several things together, so as to make one thing out of them ; the nature and goodness of which they all have a share in producing. Thus a musician composes an air, by putting notes together in certain relations ; a poet composes a poem, by putting thoughts and words in pleasant order ; and a painter a picture, by putting thoughts, forms, and colours in pleasant order. In all these cases, observe, an intended unity must be the result of composition. . . . It is the essence of composition that everything should be in a determined place, perform an intended part, and act, in that part, advantageously for everything that is connected with it . . each and every note has a

value in the position assigned to it, which, by itself, it never possessed."

Ruskin then goes on to remark that though no one can invent by rule, yet there are certain simple laws of arrangement which "will often assist you to set forth what goodness may be in your work in a more telling way than you could have done otherwise." And he gives the chief of these laws, nine in number. They are as follows and will be found worth assimilating, as a preliminary to attempting good work. I do not mean that when writing a novel or a play the author should keep worrying himself as to whether he is acting according to rule: on the contrary nothing could be more disastrous to natural, sincere, spontaneous creative effort. But I do mean that just as a tactician has absorbed the rules of warfare and acts instinctively according to the doctrine of recognised experts, on all occasions ; so the author has become so imbued with sound principles that unconsciously he writes all the time in accordance therewith. In other words he has trained himself to express his ideas in an artistic manner. In the days of your youth you were taught English grammar, and the result is that now, quite spontaneously and without thinking, you speak grammatically. Let the same principle be conceded with regard to creating literature.

1. THE LAW OF PRINCIPALITY. "The great object of composition being always to secure unity ; that is, to make out of many things one whole ; the first mode in which this can be effected is, by

determining that one feature shall be more important than all the rest, and that the others shall group with it in subordinate positions."

This principle is exemplified in our present subject by the convention of turning the searchlight, so to speak, on the hero or heroine of your story. You thus take out from a crowd of persons a particular character, make him the pivot of all that happens and invite the reader to endow this character with the maximum amount of attention, interest and sympathy. You put one character where he will remain prominent, because it is his actions which we are to consider in regard to the influences at work. It is important that this exaggeration should be planned deliberately, and as meticulously expressed : for unless you let the reader know at once with which character he is asked to sympathise, you will only arouse a confused effect in the mind of the person whose approbation you desire. And, let it be added, be careful that in selecting, you choose the right character on which to throw the light : for nothing is more irritating to your public than to find that the author has not considered it worth while to respect conventional taste and feeling.

2. THE LAW OF REPETITION. This is a basic principle, for the author must give to his creation symmetry or balance, and this involves repetition. It is such an elementary idea that everywhere there are examples at hand—in the very arrangement of your domestic furniture, the pattern of your wall-paper, the carvings in your architecture,

the massing of the books in your library. You find it in the music you listen to. It begins with a theme, wanders off into some variation or contrast, but it ends with a repetition of the way it began. As in nature there is at first calm, and this gradually works up to the climax of a gale ; so it will die down again to the calm once more. Repetition has brought about a correct balance : the aim of unity has been achieved. There must be balance in the construction of your story, in the arrangement of your characters, in their very dialogue ; if you are to get the great effect of rousing the reader's emotions. Like a storm your big situation, for instance, begins calmly, then rises to the height of passion, finally to come back to the peace which prevailed at first,

3. THE LAW OF CONTINUITY. Here we have unity achieved by an orderly succession of a number of human characters, each differing in disposition and desires, yet each fitting into the one big picture harmoniously. They differ in themselves and yet they form an agreeable whole by reason of their juxtaposition. Human nature is much the same in all centuries and generations and individuals, fundamentally. As it is with your characters, so it is with your readers. The first aim of all art is to give pleasure through the senses, and you can give your reader or audience no greater pleasure than by letting the public have the characters to love that it always loves, and the villains that it always hates. This is a convention that you must respect for the reason that it is based on a

deep-rooted instinct ; on the continuous, eternal law that right is might and will ultimately prevail. In this respect the reading public is like the play-going crowd. As Mr A. B. Walkley, the distinguished dramatic critic of the *Times*, said some years ago in a lecture before the Royal Institution : “A crowd *as a crowd* is virtuous and generous ; for we are all on our best behaviour in public. Hear the gallery at a theatre of melodrama hiss the villain ! Yet it is fairly long odds that some of them have robbed their employers, and that others will go home to beat their wives. And the crowd insists upon a strict separation of virtue and vice.”

It matters little that you are repeating the same old story, the same old situations that have been used ever since Shakespeare’s times, or even since the days of the Greeks ; for, after all, there are only thirty-six situations possible and in actual working these boil down to not more than a quarter of that number. But what does matter is that in making use of the old continuity of human action you make your characters clear-cut, alive, distinct, yet recognisable as parts of that vast organisation which is composed only of men and women with all their fears and hates and longings and despairs.

4. THE LAW OF CURVATURE. You may well ask what is the connection here ; but the answer is quite simple. Just as in drawing all curves are more beautiful than straight lines ; and all beautiful objects from the human figure to the lines of a ship, are terminated in delicately curved lines, so, it is with literary creation. Jagged ends, harsh-

ness, sudden termination, these are to be avoided. In working out your theme, the story sweeps up like the curve of a wave to its climactic height. Let your dialogue be smooth and not irritating to the ear : let your sentences have the curved composition of a good picture. Everything in the story or the play ought to work with such smoothness that the public cannot hear the creaking of the machinery. The dovetailing in of characters and incidents ought to be smooth and beautiful, so natural, in fact, that they seem inevitable. And this can be done only when regard is had to sincerity and truth. Thus, for example, you should allow your characters to work out their own plot logically, and without your interference. Your duty is rather to observe and record, than to make up incidents ; for, as soon as ever you try to force characters into channels of incidents, you begin to turn them into mere puppets, with the consequent loss of art and emotional appeal. The natural, sweeping curve of beauty, faithful and sincere, should rather be your aim as an artist.

5. THE LAW OF RADIATION. Just as in nature the most perfect connection of lines is the harmonious radiation of branches from the tree, yet all these unite to form a beautiful group ; so it is with music, with the currents of melody springing from the main *motif*, and so it is in literary composition. The main theme of your story radiates branches, minor developments ; yet all the time harmonious and uniting to bring out the big, emotional effect. It is this grouping which breaks up the monotony

of a perfectly straightforward story beginning with cause and ending with effect. From your main plot there branch out minor issues, which, far from spoiling the general beauty of the whole, actually clothe it with exuberance. So long as the main theme of the story is not lost sight of, and the branches are still united to the grand *motif*, your novel or play will gain in power by this radiation. The barrenness of the scenario is lost in the verdure of detail, and yet the essential story is there all the time dominating and feeding these branches which are a part of itself. Thus, in practice, no scene or situation, no line of dialogue, no character should be allowed into the theme which does not contribute to the main effect. The beauty of the branches is that they spring naturally from the tree trunk. They continue essential parts of the whole. It must be so with the radiation in creative literature.

6. THE LAW OF CONTRAST. There are few rules in life which contain more obvious truth. By contrast the true character stands out manifest and clear. We never fully appreciate the good things of life until they have been, temporarily at least, removed from us. Rest is never properly enjoyed except after labour, food after hunger, drink after thirst, light after darkness, night after day. So it enters into fiction-writing as it does into the art of painting. Some time since a young author went to a well-known theatrical manager with an idea for a play. The manager listened with interest, almost with enthusiasm, but in the end sent him away with the criticism that there was

not enough contrast between the hero and the other principal of the play. The trouble was that the hero did not show up sufficiently conspicuously, and there was a corresponding loss of power. For your principal character you must have a foil by way of showing up the characteristics of the two. If, for example, you wish to tell the story of a noble, unselfish, poor poet, who is in love with his ideal specimen of womanhood, let him be contrasted with a man who is a bombastic, self-centred, fortunate, matter-of-fact man of the world. By this means you see each man mutually throwing the other into relief, especially if also you make them both in love with the same woman. The sympathy of the reader will naturally be with the poet because pity is such a powerful emotion, and the author who endeavours so to write the story as to try and win sympathy for the other man is working along wrong lines. He has not begun to understand the public whom he must please.

At the same time it is necessary to extend a warning. You can be too strong in your contrasts, so that they defeat their own ends. A violent contrast is something crude, harsh, inartistic. "Great painters," says Ruskin, "do not commonly, or very visibly, admit violent contrast. They introduce it by stealth, and with intermediate links of tender change; allowing, indeed, the opposition to tell upon the mind as a surprise, but not as a shock." Thus, there must be a close correspondence in some essential respect before you can properly contrast one person or thing with another. The instance of the poet

and the other man is too harsh to be artistic, but it was mentioned deliberately for the purpose of illustration.

Contrast in stories and plays is a most valuable species of technique and brings about most desirable effects, not merely in respect of characters but in regard to environment, time, place, weather, movement, appearance and mood. Such points as these can be varied so that they will bring out the value of the story in a remarkable manner. The crudest form of contrast is seen in melodrama or in posters, or in serial stories. The appeal here is to the largest public, to the widest range of humanity : therefore it is of a simple, strong, easily understood type, which requires no worrying about. The innocent, immaculate heroine, sinned against but never sinning ; the deep-dyed villain with dark eyes and moustache complete ; the adventuress vamp ; the simple-minded, faithful hero—here you have strong, conventional contrasts intended to please people of elementary education and taste, who have no patience with the subtleties of life. As a means of acquiring sound, literary technique, this kind of writing is not to be despised by the beginner, for it enables him to get virility, power, irony, and emotional appeal, however crude, into his story. Presently, more accurate observation and more complete knowledge will show him that there are more hues in human nature than deep black and spotless white.

In playing on the emotions, the value of contrast cannot too much be emphasised. It is a well-known theatrical device, that if you wish

to make your audience weep, you should first make them laugh. If you wish to have an impressive stillness, it must be preceded by noise, and the very finest example of this kind of contrast is to be found in the close of the second act of Wagner's "Die Meistersinger," which is one of the most exquisite creations in art that the world has ever seen. You may remember how the music magnificently works up to suggest a riot in the street, how wonderfully tumult and uproar are indicated, and the composer leads your emotions up and up, as you watch the collision of combatants causing anger and fisticuffs. Then this wave of uproar dies down, the crowd disappear into their houses, the disturbed sleepers close their windows again and go back to bed. The dark stage is empty, and instead of tumultuous sounds there is heard the sound of the watchman's horn which no inhabitant dare disobey. Gradually the moon rises on the deserted Nuremberg street as the wondrously impressive music dies away. The emotional effect is immense.

Of recent plays by contemporary writers one of the best examples of emotional appeal through the senses by contrast was the 'curtain' at the end of the prologue in Mr Monckton Hoffe's "The Faithful Heart." Here you had the darkened room contrasted with the red and green lights of the distant railway signals seen through the windows at the back. The musical box, with its quaint melody, contrasts its sound with the deep tone of the liner's siren, and that in turn is contrasted with the three short blasts of the whistle of the tug. The rain

and the wind outside contrast with the stillness and warmth of the room, and all the time there is the psychological contrast between the girl remaining alone in her sadness and the young man going off to sea. The result of this close moved the audience and critics in a way they had not been affected for a long time. The reason ? Because the playwright had realised that the object of his art was to get at the audience's emotions, and this by the medium of the senses. Thus by sight, and sound ; by contrast in colours and shadows and notes and characters, and by arousing the pity of the audience ; the whole attention was surrendered to the play presented. You were gripped, you felt yourself the playwright's prisoner. In other words, the artist had won his case.

7. THE LAW OF INTERCHANGE. It is a common mistake of the beginner to regard each of his characters as if they lived their lives in separate cells. He is so anxious lest he should be accused of not making his creatures consistent, that he makes them mechanical, unbending, unyielding. There is a virtue as well as a vice in this attitude. In crude melodramas and serial stories we sometimes see, in order to bring about a certain situation, a sudden and inadequately prepared-for change of attitude in the character. The unsympathetic father in the last scene immediately relents and forgives his daughter ; the wicked husband at once realises how deeply he loves his wife and hates the other woman ; the 'crook,' who has done wrong all his life, shies at bringing off the big theft.

The aspiring author realises that this is bad art, and tries to make his men and women sternly uniform.

But this, too, is inartistic. The men and women whom you seek to portray are living in a world where they influence, and are influenced by, other people. Unless this is conceded, they are mere puppets, and the author has fallen headlong into the very trap he was anxious to avoid. This principle of interchange is really connected closely with the law of contrast. The tree trunk is darkened because it comes against the sunlight. Its character is therefore flexible, and so it must be with the characters of your story. The hero and heroine, or the villain and the vamp must not be stolid but must give and receive impressions; otherwise they can bear little resemblance to actuality. The high-souled hero may for a time be tempted by the vamp, or the dishonest villain—I am using these conventionals for the sake of clearness—and may even temporarily fall from his high estate. He may listen to the calumnies which are whispered about the girl he loves, and for that reason may throw her aside. As Ruskin expresses it: “The typical purpose of the law of interchange is, of course, to teach us how opposite natures may be helped and strengthened by receiving each, as far as they can, some impress or reflection, or imparted power, from the other.”

8. THE LAW OF CONSISTENCY. And yet, whilst your characters must yield to this interplay of influences, there must be a unity and sympathy

in them, or there is a great loss of power. Contrast exhibits and displays character ; interchange keeps them flexible and human ; consistency gives them value, unity, coherence, fidelity, order, and prevents dissemination of strength. Instead of indefiniteness you get a character with breadth and depth ; and the author's skill lies in first conceiving such a person of his drama and then conveying this conception to the reader by a rational arrangement of his interacting characters, by the logical situations which arise, and the inevitability of the *dénouement*. It follows, then, that this consistency can be obtained only by sincerity of study, adequate observation, and the careful selection of material that will illustrate the effect aimed at. But all the time you must recollect that you are depicting not one portrait but a group, and there must be consistency of the whole pattern into which the characters are to fit as essential, component parts.

9. THE LAW OF HARMONY. It is a fundamental necessity of the artist that he is a skilful manipulator. Unlike the lawyer and the business man, he is allowed and must rearrange his facts to suit his purpose : he must select. The painter looking at a landscape selects just those features which will give him the idealised representation. He is not a photographer but an artist, so he can twist his hills and foliage about, emphasise here and compress there until he has a well-composed subject. He could not possibly represent the whole of these natural facts, so he abstracts those which are

salient. The portrait painter, likewise, looks at his subject, fastens on those salient features which seem to display the sitter's character, and concentrates on these while leaving others vague. Now, because of this re-creation in the mind of the artist, there follows the necessity that this representation must be harmonious in its result. In literary creation there are all sorts of harmonies that must not be neglected in the composition of the whole, and it is because you are sensitive to impressions and affected by moods that this rule requires watching.

It may be that on a certain bright, spring day you have in the fullness of your enthusiasm written a chapter of your novel or a scene in your play, which, excellent in itself, is out of harmony with the scene you wrote whilst smarting under depression. You may be so in love with one of your characters as to leave the others neglected, as a painter who has delineated with care and devotion one part of his picture at noontide height, but has come back later in the day to brush in the rest rapidly and uninspired. The result is lack of harmony, because of lack of equal inspiration. In the theatre it is not unusual to find an excellent first act, and a gradual falling off in interest throughout the rest of the play. The harmony which should pervade the whole is absent.

But there is harmony to be maintained in other respects, and unless the author has the endowment of taste and refinement, he is bound to go wrong. A delightful, flimsy, delicate light comedy of manners, with charming characters and witty

dialogue, can have the whole harmony spoilt by a sudden descent into melodrama or a questionable situation or sentence. On the other hand it adds considerably to the story-writer's effect if he so works on the mood of his characters as to harmonise with the mood of nature. For example, you can emphasise the bleak, rugged, lonely character of your tattered tramp by depicting him struggling along a desolate, wind-swept moorland through the rain and darkness of a late autumn night. The concentrative harmony has its fullest influence on the reader. And in the same manner the very arrangement of your words, and the selection of the sounds must be employed to bring about this harmonisation. Consider the aggregate effect of such colouring as is conveyed by the juxtaposition of the above words: "bleak, rugged, lonely, tattered, tramp, struggling, desolate, wind-swept, moorland, rain, darkness, late, autumn, night." The cumulative effect is to create a harmony of tone, a definite impression on the mind of the reader, and to advance the strength of the story you are telling.

Thus, briefly, by analogy with the laws which dominate other arts, we have arrived at a body of basic principles which should be cultivated and thought over before proceeding to the bye-laws which are peculiar to that special art which is the subject of our present study.

CHAPTER III

CHARACTER

IN the consideration of the author's art we have arrived at the stage that in our fiction, whether it be a novel, a play or a short story, there must be a principal character or characters ; there must be symmetry, continuity ; nothing jarring, but everything working smoothly ; yet there must be contrast ; the characters must be flexible, susceptible to influences, not machine-made, yet consistent ; and the composition of all these various entities must form one harmonious whole.

There is no royal road to success in this sphere, except the road of study, hard work and perseverance. The right use of words, the acquisition of style, that indefinable magnetic communication set up between author and reader--these cannot be taught : they are too personal, and spring from the author's natural, artistic temperament developed according to the influences under which he has been moulded. But, having learnt to think clearly ; to sort out your ideas, to eliminate the essential from the non-essential, the principal from the subsidiary ; having appreciated the value

of character, scene, incident, setting and mood, it is possible to begin to practise the art of fiction and to move all the time towards perfection, because you are working along the right lines. It is useless to have a fruitful imagination and new ideas unless you know the technique of setting them forth ; but it is equally unprofitable to have a fine style unless you have a burning desire to tell a well-constructed story of interesting, human people in situations that will invite the sympathy of readers of to-day.

No two persons see the same thing in the same way. Let two people, for example, witness an accident in the street, or watch a mountain sunrise, or a ship in a storm ; and then let each sit down and describe in the same number of words the incident which has been observed. It is surprising to find how the one person has been most impressed by an aspect of the incident, which has left the other unmoved. It is just the same thing, of course, with regard to fiction-writing. You can give the same scenario to a whole class of students, and they will produce stories differing according to each writer's temperament and experience of life. One man sees with the eyes of a realist, another with the eyes of a poet, a third with the perception of a cynic. A fourth will write that same scenario into a character study, whilst a fifth will turn it into an exciting, thrilling melodrama ; and a sixth might possibly even work it out into a humorous story.

Thus, before you begin, you must know exactly what you want to say, what is your aim, and how

you hope to attain your effects. It is the story which matters, but you must first make up your mind what kind of story you propose to tell. Is the emphasis on the character or the incident? This is entirely for you to decide, but whatever kind of story or play you want to write, get this new principle firmly grasped:—Incident must proceed from character and not character from incident; otherwise you will never create heroes and heroines of flesh and blood, but anæmic, lifeless puppets, which may even be accused of being filled with sawdust, instead of red blood.

“The dramatist,” says Mr Galsworthy, “who depends his characters to his plot, instead of his plot to his characters, ought himself to be depended.” This ought to be obvious; and yet editors and publishers will tell you that time after time the author has not taken the trouble to realise his characters, but merely used them (like the authors of musical comedy characters) as a means of attaching the incidents of the story. I can conceive of no pleasure for the aspirant in trying to achieve by this means. There can be no real joy in his work, certainly no delight in human experience and no sympathy: and if you omit this, how can you expect your reader to feel pleasure? “The human interest in Fiction,” wrote Sir Walter Besant twenty years ago, but as truly as to-day, “must come before aught else. . . . First, and before everything else, there is the Rule that everything in Fiction which is invented, and is not the result of personal experience and

observation, is worthless . . . the characters must be real, and such as might be met with in actual life, or, at least, the natural developments of such people as any of us might meet ; their actions must be natural and consistent ; the conditions of place, of manners, and of thought must be drawn from personal observation." And again : " As soon as the actors in the story become real in the minds of the narrator, and not before, the story itself becomes real to him."

If you reason for a moment, you will see that this attitude of the practitioners is undeniably sensible. All incident springs from character. The prisoner who hit another man in the course of an argument and pleaded that his act was the result of impulse, was in so many words admitting that his character was impulsive. From a simple character will proceed simple incidents, a subtle nature will do subtle things, a passionate nature will be big in his hates and loves, a cold-hearted character will not have the right to be given an emotional speech or to bring about a fine, self-sacrificing situation. And if you will only begin by choosing your characters with the greatest care, and then let them work out the plot, subject to your guidance as to emphasis, symmetry, contrast, harmony, and so on ; you will have in the end a work of art, true to life, faithful and sincere. But everything depends on your preparation : it is the preliminaries which count, the art which conceals art.

Many times when you have read a novel or come out of a playhouse, you have said to yourself :

"I am sure I could write a story just as good as that. Why it all happened just as it ought to have happened ! The heroine did just what I should have done, or the hero acted in that big scene just as I hope I should do in such circumstances. The whole thing was so convincing and straightforward." Little did you realise that in saying so much you were paying the highest possible compliment to the author of that story. It was entirely through him that you had been made to believe in those characters and in the reality of the situations. He had observed those persons so accurately, and selected the elements of the story so cleverly that though they passed through his brains to you, they seemed so life-like, and the setting was so true that you were completely illusioned.

But think what this all meant ! If the author had simply said to himself : "I will set down a number of strong situations and moving incidents and then choose a few suitable characters to bring these out," he would never have convinced any but the most illiterate and unsophisticated. Every moment you would have found yourself quarrelling with the author. Putting yourself in the place of the heroine or hero, you would have argued : "I should never have acted like that. I don't understand these characters : they seem not to do the things which are reasonable. They are lop-sided beings from another world. I cannot feel sufficient interest in them, nor give them my sympathy. I may have been thrilled by the daring incidents, but I cannot believe that they ever lived, and

consequently they soon pass out of my recollection."

But the reason you derived so much lasting pleasure from the artistic story that you remembered the persons in it for months and years afterwards was this : the author, before writing, had realised his characters, visualised his scenes, selected from his trained observation, felt deeply those poignant situations, suffered with the hero, and then at last put all this before you. "Remember," said Besant, "that most of the people who read novels, and know nothing about the art of writing them, recognise before any other quality that of fidelity : the greatness of a novelist they measure chiefly by the knowledge of the world displayed in his pages ; the highest praise they can bestow upon him is that he has drawn the story to the life." Without doubt the most successful novel of modern times is Mr A. S. M. Hutchinson's *If Winter Comes*. The fundamental reason for its success lies in the fact that its characters are real, life-like ; and you cannot but believe that they existed ; and all this was because the author before attempting to write his story spent so long in preparation, in observing, in selecting.

"I had thought out for myself," says Mr Hutchinson, "all the characters who are now in *If Winter Comes*. I knew the village where they lived, their homes, their businesses. Often when I was tired I found it refreshing to lift myself right out of my surroundings and in imagination visit these people, talk to them, and have them talk to me of all their little troubles. . . . My impulse

always comes from characters and not from plot. . . . It took me eighteen months to write it."

Therefore, after you have felt that you must write a work of fiction, begin by choosing your characters, and select them not merely because they are interesting and will thus do interesting things, but because they are a little unusual, a little idealised, a little superior to most people ; for you are writing not a journalistic account for an ephemeral newspaper, but a work of art that you hope will be read the day after to-morrow and for a long time to come. And because you are not writing as a journalist, you must take your observations for the hero, heroine, or whichever the character may be, not from one single person, but from several. In real life it is rare to find the ideal ready at hand. If you want the tall, good-looking hero, with the gentleness of manner, the saint-like humility and the intense intellect, the simplicity which attracts women and children but the straight manliness which makes him a leader of men ; you will have to amalgamate into one creature the virtues observed in half a dozen persons. Here lies your art, here lies your ability to select and observe, and convince. You are not inventing : you are re-creating. Let him live in your brain for a while, and let him be to you a real acquaintance, so that you know his strength and weakness, his temptations, his reserve, his moods, his self-renunciation. Consider his capabilities for loving and hating, his ideals, his hopes and fears ; and then reflect what man or woman would be the kind to make the best foil, would

best bring out by contrast the points in his character.

Observe, select and amalgamate the heroine's personality and appearance in the same way ; and having determined that both hero and heroine are to you life-like and to themselves suitable foils and adequately contrasted ; set them down in some suitable environment, and then, so to speak, lock them up and watch them as a bacteriologist watches the germs begin to act. Something is bound to happen, for nothing in life stands still. In the case of the type of hero just mentioned, suppose you select as heroine a flighty, good-hearted, slightly vulgar, unmoral yet not immoral young woman, disillusioned with life, bereft of ideals, yet longing to win the love of a good man whom until now she has never met. Now it must be perfectly obvious that if this hero and this heroine are given the opportunity by the novelist of meeting, a plot will follow : there will be drama, there will be action, there will be the collision of wills, in other words what we call a story. Choose your environment as you wish, let the scene of the meeting take place in London or Venice, in the primitive forest or on a lonely island ; introduce a third force in the shape of a man or a woman, or the struggle against fate or temptation ; vary your theme with contrasts of setting and mood ; bring in the subsidiary characters, and, behold, you have at hand the skeleton of a play or novel. You have begun with character, you have watched character working on character, and circumstance on both. From this it is inevitable that situation-

should spring, and in proportion as the characters are interesting and human, emotional and true to observation ; so will they appeal to your reader. You have had to modify the original conception of your hero, so as to let him act opposite to the heroine more suitably : but that, of course, is part of your duty as a manipulator.

But, because you are really a biographer than an inventor, a student of nature rather than the individual behind a puppet-show, you cannot fail to convince provided you have these characters clear in your mind and will take the trouble to employ the technique essential for their representation. "It may be asked, finally," says Mr Arnold Bennett: "What of the actual process of handling the raw material dug out of existence and of the artist's self—the process of transmuting life into art ? There is no process. That is to say, there is no conscious process. The convention chosen by an artist is his illusion of the truth. Consciously the artist only omits, selects, arranges. But let him beware of being false to his illusion, for then the process becomes conscious, and bad. This is sentimentality, which is the seed of death in his work. Every artist is tempted to sentimentalise, or to be cynical—practically the same thing. And when he falls to the temptation, the reader whispers in his heart, be it only for one instant : 'That is not true to life.' And in turn the reader's illusion of reality is impaired."

But the importance of character to the fiction-writer is so important that we cannot end here, and we must devote another chapter to this inter-

esting subject. Thus far, then, if the reader has agreed, we have seen that plot must follow and not precede character, and that observation must come before both, and that the author must intrude only to regulate what follows. His is the controlling influence, not the generating force.

CHAPTER IV

CHARACTER AND CHARACTERISATION

MANY aspirants, even when they have visualised their characters, will not let them act their parts, but insist on obtruding the author's mind, which comes down like a fog enveloping all in the same dull drab ; instead of drawing them while the bright sunlight shines down and shows up their true colours. This often happens owing to fatigue, laziness, or uncertainty in observation.

Every human being or animal has a character of his own, something peculiar and distinct. Have you never noticed, for instance, the character expressed in the way a person enters the room ? One will come in quietly, shyly, bashfully, nervously. Another will walk in with quiet confidence, dignified, self-composed ; a third will have an exaggerated self-importance, an air of possession, patronising, condescending. Or imagine yourself in a theatre when there is a report that the place is on fire, and see how this affects character in the audience differently. One woman will shriek and go off into hysterics, another will rush for the door, a third will remain calm and sensible, a fourth will be busy looking after those who have

become injured in the rush. It is the same with a dog or a horse : each has a character distinct and individual. Therefore, though it is your duty to realise this character, and to bring it out, you must be careful that it is not dominated by yours : otherwise you commit artistic murder.

Of course it is impossible to depict the entire nature of your hero, heroine, or subsidiary characters. The workings of human causes are too diffuse and complex for that, and so again you select. From a mass of detail, you choose, exaggerate and polish up only those which are salient and convey the required impression. Success in this direction is entirely a matter of practice, but it is to be remembered that the greatest art here is to suggest rather than to define in so many words. A mere category informing the reader how refined is the heroine will not convince ; but if you show that she shuddered at the bad taste displayed in the room, or that the villain's raucous voice grated on her nerves, or that she was moved to ecstasy by the way the hero played a Chopin's *polonaise*, or that she arranged her flowers to match the colour-scheme of her drawing-room cushions, you begin to visualise this woman to the reader. Add a deft touch, presently, such as "her delicate, thin hands lightly touched the bronze statue with the discrimination of a connoisseur," and there is no ambiguity, but the utmost economy to bring about a complete effect.

Whether you write stories to be read or plays to be seen, you must remember that you are really working not single-handed but co-operating with

someone else. The person who takes up a novel or goes into the theatre is there for enjoyment. He is ready to meet you half way, to enter into the swing of your story, to hate your villains and weep with your heroines. He is not altogether inexperienced in things human, and if you will only give him sufficient hints as to character, and let him understand clearly the problem to be solved, and which characters you want him to love and which to hate, he is there to help you through. He is out to be interested, entertained ; but if you bore him or put him off with unconvincing or tiresome people, he will not merely not help you but show extreme annoyance for having trifled with his sympathy and wasted his time.

It therefore follows that it is well, as soon as you introduce your characters, to give some description which will help the story-reader to appreciate their distinctive features both physically and psychologically. No long description is needed, but just a subtle, comprehensive hint either in action or words, and the rest of the details can be worked in during the remainder of the story as you complete a puzzle of pictorial bricks. If you introduce the man friend of the heroine by saying that he gave the heroine's pet spaniel a vicious kick and then took possession of the most comfortable chair in the room, you are ready to hear him dominate the conversation with his own glorification. You grasp the fact that you are expected to regard him as an unpleasant person ; and every action and sentence will go to fill in this impressionistic sketch formed in your mind. The

inexperienced amateur usually introduces him by describing his height, age, face, eyes, adding that he "possessed a cruel look." It is far better to show this than to say it.

In the novel you have the maximum amount of room in which to show the traits of your persons. You are painting on a big canvas a full-length portrait. When the hero makes love to the heroine, you can have the setting spread before the reader in detail. The smell of the sea is in the air, combining with the scents of the flowers ; the inmost feelings of the hero and heroine are put before the reader, so that nothing is wanting ; the heroine's thoughts have been analysed, her very soul dissected ; thus the reader shall miss nothing of the climax to which the author is working. The latter can even add a phrase of his own here and there to get atmosphere, a piece of detached philosophy, an analogy ; any subtle touch provided it has a concentrating and not dissipating effect. He wants the reader to feel all that he feels as the spectator, and every artifice is thus employed.

On the stage the painted canvas, coloured lights, and the sound imitating the surf suggest the setting to the audience. The author cannot describe in detail all that is passing through the heart and mind of the heroine. The fewest lines, deeply laden with emotion, pregnant with meaning, must be uttered and vitalised by the tone of the actress's voice and intensified by her gestures. Three words—"I love you"—and a silence must and can convey a whole page of effect which is permitted to the novelist. Thus, action has taken the place of

words. In the case of the cinema this tendency has to go a step further still. You cannot hear the heroine speak, you are not allowed to read more than a line of description now and again ; so, in order to bring about the required effect, the emotion can be made intense only by emphasis of action and by exaggeration of expression and gesture.

In the present state of the cinema art this exaggeration is by no means always legitimate, but is well worth studying, for it errs on the right side. Too little action means a very dull story, and blurred characters ; but the only way, or rather the most effective legitimate manner in which a person can show his traits is certainly in action, and it is because of this difference between the novel on the one hand and the play or cinema on the other that the same author so often fails in one form of art. I remember some time since accompanying an author to the first night of his play. He had written a number of very successful novels, and the play which we went to watch was dramatised from that which was admittedly the best of all his stories ; but though the book sold well, the play had a very short run. During the first act and in the interval my friend told me that in watching the persons and listening to the dialogue of his brain that evening, he realised finally the immense gulf existing between the two arts. He had failed to appreciate the all-importance in a play of action with the minimum amount of words. And just as good novelists often write the worst plays, so it is true that the best novels

sometimes are total failures on the screen, especially those which are stories of character than of action.

Robert Louis Stevenson never made a good dramatist, and even Mr Arnold Bennett will live by his novels and not by his plays. The latter author, in fact, regards the playwright as a 'sub-novelist.' Mr Somerset Maugham, Sir James Barrie, Mr Galsworthy and others have distinguished themselves in both arts, but Sir Arthur Pinero is among those dramatists who have confined themselves to the theatre. And so one could go on with the list. It is partly a matter of temperament, and partly of choice. The novelist and the playwright both work with the same materials—character and situation and dialogue and setting ; both aim at interesting the public emotionally, and yet the difference between the two arts is most notable. The reason is found not merely in the superior conciseness, acceleration of action, and intensity of the play ; but in its clarity and its vividness. The play is nearer to life, and a good drama will admit of falsification far less readily than will a novel. The dual personality idea in the late Mrs Katherine Cecil Thurston's novel *John Chilcote, M.P.*, which was one of the most successful and popular novels of the early years of this present century, worked out splendidly on the printed page. But when it was dramatised it was impossible to convey this idea of two identically similar persons in a manner convincing to the audience, so before long Sir George Alexander withdrew the play, although

before production I remember him telling me what high expectations he had of it. In the same way there are stories of horror which we can bear to read in a novel that would be unbearable on the stage, because however imaginative we may be, nothing is so real as to see and hear living people.

I remember a curious illustration of this principle. There are few boys who have not even in these modern days, delighted in pirates and full-blooded murders. The reading of these incidents is the delight of being thrilled, but I was once sitting by a boy in the theatre when the realisation of such an incident so overwhelmed him that he shuddered and hid his head. The occasion was at the Criterion and the play was Sir Charles Hawtrey in "Ambrose Applejohn's Adventure." Had the same story been read by this boy, there would have been no recoiling because the murderous knifing would have been less vivid, the imagination would not have succeeded in realising either characters or environment with such completeness. Thus, where the dramatist is able to enjoy the assistance of scenery and real, live people; and to switch on at will a rising moon or setting sun, a storm, or the sweet, soothing sounds of the forest; the novelist has to rely on his own unaided efforts and to make his characters full of life and convey to the reader all the sounds, and perfumes in the air, the colouring and shades and grouping of the picture in which his creatures are to move. All the time the novelist has to remember not merely these external manifestations, but the

invisible psychology which is going on perpetually inside these characters. As one critic has summed it up very neatly: "he understands their philosophy and notices their buttons."

With the novelist, then, character may be delineated either by detailed description (which is the crudest method), or by suggestion, or by action and dialogue; or yet again by allowing other characters to speak of him. Whether you adopt one or more of these methods, the essential aim is to make them alive and real, and unusually interesting. In the case of your hero you are on the road which leads to popularity if you follow these sign-posts:—make him lovable, charming, unselfish, arousing pity by his weakness; picture him as a noble, big-souled being, yet foolish in those little things of life which women have the knack of managing so well. Let him suffer for his fidelity to a person or worthy cause; contrast him with the successful, petty-minded, despicable people around him. Show the intense humanity of this misunderstood, much maligned martyr; infuse a strong love story, with logical but powerful situations. Keep the story going by suspense, rapidity of action, surprise; work up to a big climax, permit sentiment without descending to sentimentalism, remember the contrasting value of humour; and, finally, work out the story logically to a happy ending.

If there is to be a big alteration in character, by which one of the persons in the story leads a different life, this change must be prepared

for and not thrust anyhow into the plot. For instance, it is customary enough in the old-fashioned melodrama to find a sudden change in the temperament of the villain at the end of the play, a surprising repentance, and toleration towards the much-suffering heroine. The play ends up in happy tears and mutual forgiveness. Or you find the irate father of the eloping daughter who has vowed never to allow his son-in-law inside the house, suddenly handing out a free pardon one minute before the end of the last act, and even making him partner in his business. This is not art but mere mechanism, unless there is some genuine, acceptable, convincing reason for this change—other than the desire to bring about a conventional happy conclusion. And, inasmuch as the opportunities for this sudden character change are very few in fiction, it is well to avoid the device. Rather indicate the gradual, cumulative effect of influences on character, its slow yielding to a new force, its almost unconscious, imperceptible transition from one state to another diametrically opposite. We want the sweeping curve of the artist; not the line going off at a tangent.

When once you have got your characters clear-cut in your mind, independent, vivid, you will find that in spite of yourself they will walk out from your brain on to the printed page, because unconsciously you will be writing little touches which can proceed only from a full and entire knowledge of the persons. Somehow, in a way that neither you nor the reader can analyse, these

characters have leapt right across from one brain to another. By your cleverness and sincerity you have enabled him to enjoy not a photograph but a psychological picture, wherein everything that matters has been emphasised, and all that is superfluous is omitted. But if you have to indicate a character in a detailed manner you will find it is enough to confine yourself to the following seven traits :—his brow, his eyes, his mouth, his voice, his gesture, his gait, and his dress. The fewer of these you employ at a time, the better ; for just as an admiral or general who endeavours to have his forces everywhere merely causes universal weakness along the line, so the novelist who emphasises every characteristic really emphasises nothing. There is dissipation of effort, lack of contrast, no background to provide a foreground. And if you choose, as indeed you must, one, two or three outstanding characters in your story on which the limelight is projected, showing up with keener sympathy and insight their physical and psychological features, then you must be content to leave the minor characters merely outlined, but these lines must be emphasised and exaggerated, so that you get definiteness though not detail.

Flaubert required of de Maupassant that he should be able to look at an object until he saw not merely all that everyone else saw, but what everyone had so far failed to perceive. In describing a row of cab-horses all looking alike, he was to make the reader perceive that characteristic which makes one of these horses different

'rom the rest. Life is full of character, if only you have the eyes to see it. Every moment of the day people around you are showing their attributes, and it is for you as an artist to observe and receive impressions, so that you begin to form a kind of mental gallery of characters, where you can go to take down a suitable subject for your next story. The picture may require a little touching up but it is there indicative of a definite personality.

Do novelists draw their characters from models in real life? Do characters thus drawn seem more real in the story, or to yourself, than those that are purely imaginary? These two questions were recently put by the *Bookman* to a number of modern novelists. Sir Gilbert Parker replied that he did not always model his characters on definite living models, but every book he has written has been founded on the real life of someone he knew. Sometimes, he says, he adds to or takes away from the original model, but to him the characters modelled on actual persons do not seem more real, for he admits that if an author loves his work, his characters become real to him. Mr Archibald Marshall replied that he did not draw his characters from models in real life. "I do not see," he says, "how characters modelled on actual persons can be so real in a novel as those whom the novelist creates for himself." Miss Kathlyn Rhodes confessed that only once has she taken a character bodily from real life, and in that instance a well-known critic said that this character was most exaggerated.

Mr E. F. Benson agrees that principal characters can never be successfully drawn from single individuals. "They have to be types, and must be largely imaginary, and in any case composite." Mr de Vere Stacpoole says that he does not consciously draw his characters from real life but does so subconsciously, "fusing perhaps several characters together." Mr Hugh Walpole, also, never uses living models. These suggest themes and traits, but the characters in the book have always for the author their own independent individual life.

Thus, to sum up, before you can expect to write a novel that will appeal through the mind of the reader to his heart, you must first observe, select, modify, and visualise the people which you intend to employ for your story. Take care of the characters and the story, subject to your supervision, will take care of itself. Let your characters be human and interesting, let them be a little above the ordinary men and women one meets, but never let them cease to be such as demand our sympathetic consideration. As you have them in your brain real and true and consistent, compact and harmonious, natural, flexible; so with an economy of touch you must pass on this conception to the reader. Observation in itself is an art, and the recording of things observed is another art, too. You will, therefore, in your preliminary training endeavour to develop these twin arts in order that between the imagination and its expression there shall be a perfect unity and complete understanding. Without this

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condition it is impossible to hope that you will be able to capture the interest of the reader and compel him to accept your creatures as people of flesh and blood with hearts and emotions.

CHAPTER V

PLOT

IN any story, whether read or seen or listened to, there must always be characters doing something. When one person tries to win the love of another, or to overcome some obstacle, or to wrestle against fate, or to beat a man in a business deal, or to come in first after a race, you have drama—you have a story.

That which we call a plot is nothing else but the compressed narrative of characters doing certain things under certain conditions. Unless there is some clashing of will with will or other opposition, there can be no story. Put briefly, every novel or play is merely the recounting of a contest; or, more truly, the depiction of this contest, so that you seem to be present as a spectator. It is characteristic of the human being that he thoroughly enjoys watching a struggle. He will travel miles and endure discomfort to witness the Derby or a prize fight or a football match, and the more even the struggle the greater is his enjoyment.

As soon as you have your characters well alive in your mind, and suitably placed as to environment, they will begin to weave the story for you

if you let them alone and just watch. Take the high-souled hero, and the girl we saw in a previous chapter who longs to be loved but has never up till now found the man she can trust. Can you believe that with a temperament such as hers and the right man within reach there will not quickly develop drama of some sort? It is not even necessary to have a love drama. You can take the case of a man fighting for his life against shipwreck, or against adversity in any form, or against the temptation to drink. You can show the time-honoured struggle between love and duty, between the dictates of his conscience and the acquisition of wealth, between his allegiance to party and the love for his wife. You can have the eternal triangle of man-woman-man; or of woman-man-woman. You can choose the theme of a woman's love for her husband versus her love for her child. You can make your drama not of love but of politics or of business; in fact of anything you like. But whatever subject you select there must be drama, or there can be no story.

Why is it that so often you find a reader skipping pages of a novel in order to get on to what he calls the exciting part? He wearies of too much description: he wants to see people doing things, he longs for action and incident, because it is part of his nature that he takes pleasure in a struggle. If once you get interested in the adventures of an attractive character or characters, can you honestly lay down that story or go out of the theatre pretending you are not anxious to

know how the drama ended ? It is on this human peculiarity that the skilful dramatist or novelist knows how to play, when, after adequate preparation, he leads the reader up to a situation of suspense, so entralling that he must stop to see what happened. Will her true love never come back ? Will the stern husband forgive the penitent wife ? Will the brave hero, dangling at the end of a rope over the edge of a cliff, fall a sheer hundred feet to destruction, or will he by some means be saved ? You have by the intensity of your observation so thoroughly filled the mind of your reader with the reality of the drama going on that he is transported to the edge of that cliff ; his feelings and fears are identical with those of your hero. All this is as it should be, your art has shown itself convincing.

The dramatic instinct, or sense of the theatre is one of the finest mental gifts which any creator of fiction could desire ; and without it you can never expect to put forward big, moving situations. If you have this possession, use it and develop it : if you still lack it, try and educate yourself to acquire it. Seeing and reading plays will help you much in this respect and help to train your imagination, yet to have lived tense moments, to have been placed oneself in exciting situations —these will be a greater source of assistance. For what is imagination but largely recollection of past incidents ? How can we sympathise unless first we have suffered ? Thus, again, the literary art depends rather on observation than invention.

And before we proceed further, let us emphasise the importance of suspense. This is where the author of the straightforward, direct, character novel so often fails when he tries to write for the theatre. Suspense—the poising and hesitating of the story—is achieved by rousing the reader's curiosity, by exciting and quickening his interest, by allowing the hero almost to succeed in his struggle, but then withdrawing achievement from his grasp when it seemed so certain. You hurl him into the slough of disappointment, and then let him try again. The resultant effect is reinforced excitement, a deeper hope on the part of the reader that success may now come; and a further quickening of sympathetic interest.

Without suspense the story becomes monotonous, lacking in contrast. It is untrue to human experience, for all life is a struggle from birth to death. The author selects just one phase in the hero's biography and amplifies this contest for a definite purpose. Too much suspense, like too much emphasis, of course defeats its own ends. The reader soon becomes satiated. It must therefore, like all other artistic elements, be used with restraint and discretion; and thus employed it will throw into relief the remainder of the story. But in order that your reader may fully enter into the value of the suspense, you must prepare him. If you watch the art of the conjurer, you will see that before he begins his trick he prepares the audience by telling them what he is going to do. This, far from minimising the illusion actually intensifies it, because

the audience sits up and takes greater notice. If, for example, the wife in your story has been living alone for years, and you let the reader know that she fears her husband, who used to ill-treat her, may at any moment enter the room and there will develop a big, human scene ; the reader will hurry on down the page and over the leaf eager to see this meeting take place. Nothing will make him put the book down until his curiosity has been satisfied. Now further increase the suspense by letting the nerve-wrought heroine hear a knock at the door, or distant footsteps, or a man's voice. The door opens, and there enters a man but not *the* man. You breathe a sigh of relief, and this delay action, this retarded movement, this 'almost success' and temporary disappointment will accentuate the interest and still more enchain the reader's attention.

This principle, then, of increasing interest as the story advances is most important, and necessitates careful arrangement of material. Well, we have got our characters, we have decided which are to be the principals, we know their dominating traits, we have left them in our minds to develop, we have, during our walks and idle moments, watched them working out their plot. The next thing is to sit down and quite naturally write out a brief, simple statement of the story without any striving after effect. From this page of manuscript we have the embryonic novel or play. We are able to get a bird's-eye view of the whole drama, and can see how the plot will work out,

where the climax will come, what the *dénouement* will be, what are the settings, and the rough outlines of the subsidiary characters. As it stands it is all rather crude, somewhat ill-balanced, quite undeveloped, full of inharmonious blemishes, but for all that a sincere, representative statement.

The next thing is to get cohesion, sequence and symmetry ; so you begin by working at this rough plot until you have a proper scenario, that is to say, a succession of 'scenes' or incidents. You will probably find now that some of these want rearranging. That big scene between the hero and heroine, that is for ever to decide the rest of their lives, comes too near the early part of the story, so that the rest suffers from being an anti-climax. Perhaps you will have to modify the grouping of the characters a little more ; but at length you are satisfied with the structure of the story, and you have maintained increasing interest right to the end.

It now remains for you to write out, in far greater detail than you will ever use, the biography of each of your characters. This will enable you to show the reader with unfailing precision and consistency the persons of your drama in their every mood. You thus have before you a complete portrait, and you know the main influences which have made your people what they are. Perhaps not one half of this detail will ever be used in your narrative directly, but it will give you confidence in your work and a grasp of your subject that will be positively invaluable. You may find, too, that you will not need to use all

your characters. Never mind, this is not loss. The author of *If Winter Comes* had two characters left over from that novel but found them very useful for his next one. Then in this final scenario see that there is perfect clearness, emphasis in the right place, and that everything is smooth for that bright morning when with a pile of clean, white paper by your side you begin chapter one, and from a full heart and a complete knowledge you start writing out the drama which has for so long been dwelling in the secret places of your being. We shall not say much about dialogue until a later chapter, but if your characters and situations and settings have reached the stage suggested, and you still refrain from intruding your presence, but keep in the background as a showman should ; then you will find the conversation flows naturally, the hero and heroine and the rest speak in character, and are not enveloped in what I have already referred to as the author's drab fog. As you read through your chapters you may find a word or a phrase here and there wants improving, but the great thing is that your story has begun, the people have come to life on paper and they have begun to say and act like reasonable and unusually interesting beings.

But now we must respect another bye-law, another literary convention, which is again based on common sense. There have been novels written in spite of this law, and they have suffered accordingly. But a play which defies this principle is devoid of backbone and is as attractive as a

cripple. The drama of the theatre is really the most perfect form of story, and no student of the art of fiction in any form can afford to neglect to devote his attention to the craftsmanship which is necessary for the stage. In almost any modern play you will find its concise structure worked out something like the following : Let us suppose for the sake of convenience, that it consists of three acts. In the first act the dramatist introduces his characters to you, lets you know who is who, what is the relation between them, shows the interlocking influences which are at work, indicates with a few artistic touches their peculiar traits, shows very clearly the setting, the environment, the time, the place, the occupation, rank or social status of the characters, adds the required atmosphere, and shows the moral surroundings.

Thus for example we are transported to the poor cottage of a Cornish fisherman on Christmas Eve of the present year ; we see the simple-minded parents, and the daughter with modern ideas who longs to leave the sea-village and go to the gaiety of a big city. It is moonlight outside, and it is blowing a Christmas gale, and the man who loves her, whom nevertheless she does not love, is out in his fishing craft and it is feared he may be lost. The parents of the girl are upbraiding, with their simple piety, the daughter for having sent the young fisherman to his doom.

The greater part of this first act is expended in getting the audience acquainted with the persons and their mode of life, and this enables us to

enter into the spirit of the theme and to follow any development that may and must come after. Let us label all this introduction ‘PART I. EXPOSITION.’ So far all that you have achieved is to win the audience’s interest, to convince them that the persons and setting are very real and worthy of attention ; but nothing very much else has happened, because it is so important to win over this attitude first, to emphasise the main points, and to leave nothing ambiguous. By means of action, gesture and dialogue, the contrasted characters are as clear as it is possible to differentiate human beings. By all that she does and says we soon place the daughter as one of those independent young women whose education has made her dissatisfied with the simple home-life of her birth-place. We are made fully aware of her suppressed longings to go out into the great world, and equally we see the pain and disappointment which her conduct is causing to her primitive parents. The dramatist has added even a suggestion that the girl has a kind of affection for the young fisherman out in the gale, and there is going on all the time a heart-struggle between her self-love and the devotion of this suitor. All such entities as this increase our interest.

And then, now that the whole exposition and setting are complete, some new force comes into the act just before it closes, lifts the interest on to a higher plane, quickens the story, sets all the characters by the ears, makes the audience lean forward so as not to miss a single syllable ; and then having thoroughly worked up our interest

to a state of suspense the curtain comes down and leaves us in a state of wonderment. What, we ask, is going to happen now? For, to continue the example, we have seen someone come in from the howling, moonlit night, who announces that the young fisherman did not go out in his boat. He has left the village for good. He had killed a man and he has fled to escape the police.

The story has now begun to develop, you see, because a new factor has been introduced. Let us call this new factor the 'generating cause' and this new phase, which has been begun, let us call '**PART II. THE STRUGGLE.**' From this point when the surprising announcement was made to the astounded family, the action of the play goes on rising. We have not the space to carry on the example, but the aspirant will find it an excellent exercise if he cares to work it out according to his own ideas. During the second act this 'STRUGGLE,' by means of incidents and varied 'scenes,' each of which has its own exposition and crisis, its clashing of wills, or fighting against obstacles, works up to greater and greater emotional heights until at last we reach '**PART III. THE CLIMAX.**' This is the part of the play which is of the greatest intensity. Suspense is raised to its sublime height, the big, decisive moment has arrived, the audience is gripped as in a vice; firmly, securely. The young fisherman has burst into the room of the cottage, where the daughter is found alone. The parents have retired upstairs to bed, the fire in the hearth has burnt low, and the girl is about to turn out the lamp. Her suitor

has come to ask her to hide him from the police. Will she consent ? She tells him she loves another man who has money and position to offer her, that to-morrow she is going up to the big city to marry him. The young fisherman pleads with her, begs her to aid him. If she likes to sacrifice her ambitions she can save this fugitive. His ardent petition and her womanly sympathy on the one hand gradually wrestle with the hopes and plans which to-morrow are to receive their fulfilment. What is she to do ? Is she to sacrifice her aspirations and longings just when everything is within her grasp ; or is she to let this young fisherman whom she has known all her life, fall into the hands of his enemies ? That is the great dramatic situation, that is the climax of the story, and the curtain may now come down and leave the audience to think it over.

In the third and last act, which can be shorter than the second, you at once find yourself as an author penalised. Already you have got past the climax and there must not follow an anti-climax : otherwise the audience will relax their attention and go away disappointed. Therefore make this, which we will call 'PART IV. THE FALLING ACTION,' brief ; make it full of incident, accentuate the suspense, introduce fresh obstacles and surprise, and then bring in the logical but unexpected ending, which satisfies the audience as to its inevitability, and solves in a legitimate manner the whole problem of the story. This we name 'PART V. THE DÉNOUEMENT,' or the untying of the knot. Just how you will end this

story depends on yourself. As to taste there is no law, provided only that your treatment is convincing. Everything will depend on your attitude to the girl in the climax. You can show her swayed more by her longing for freedom and comfort than by her love for the young fisherman, and thus work out the third act to show how retribution follows and dogs her footsteps. Thus, the play may end tragically. On the other hand, the average audience rightly believes in optimism and a happy ending, and if you solicit their suffrages you must "give the public what it wants," and let them go home happy that the girl willingly, at the crisis of her life, sacrificed her future and her dearest ambitions to save a man, who, in the end, was found to have killed a blackguard only in self-defence.

Now we have illustrated in this chapter the five main divisions in the construction of a play, but it will be well if the aspiring novelist will employ these in building up any work of fiction. For here you have Ruskin's law of radiation exemplified; the unity formed by the tree trunk of the main theme and the branches which spring therefrom. Whether it is a short story or a long novel, a drama of the playhouse or the cinema, get your exposition laid out clear and precise, and thus win the spectator's attention. Then introduce the generating cause which produces a struggle that finds its culmination in the grand, central situation of the whole story. In the case of a short story or novel it is well to bring this in almost at the end, and then make the fall-

ing action and the *dénouement* follow on so quickly that there is no possibility of anti-climax, and the reader is carried on a wave of interest with such impetus that he is sorry the story has come to its finish.

Let character, then, come first, let your scenario be carefully worked out and arranged, and let your whole story be built according to these five divisions. By this means the story is held together, and though composed of many parts is yet one united whole in which everything is inter-related, all the incidents interlocking, the characters mutually influenced, no part superfluous but everywhere harmony and symmetry ; a true work of art, admirable, compact, sufficing.

CHAPTER VI

DIALOGUE

IT is in dialogue that the author at once shows whether he is an artist or merely an artisan. By the words which the author allows his characters to speak we can see at once whether he is writing from observation or merely inventing. If the latter, the conversation will fail to ring true, there will be insincerity blatant and obtrusive, whereas it ought to be smooth and natural.

A very well-known dramatist, whose plays you have probably seen many times, once told me that the outstanding weakness of the plays by amateurs usually lay in the dialogue which he described as “resembling post-office telegrams”: they were devoid of character. Now when the author allows his own fogging personality to dominate the persons of his drama, at once all characterisation and contrast disappear. All the people are the same colour, monotonous and dull, insincere to life. Characters should speak in character as they dress in character. By the way a man speaks you at once know whether he is a gentleman or a cad. You would not expect in real life to hear a politician talking like a pub-

lican, and it is no more reasonable in a work of fiction to reduce everyone's conversation to a mechanical uniformity.

How can you ever believe that your reader will be able to accept your characters unless they speak naturally, easily and without effort? The inexperienced writer is so fond of *making* his people talk instead of *allowing* them. What is the result? Instead of actuality we get something artificial, stilted and melodramatic, quite different from the dialogue we are accustomed to hear in social transactions. The use of dialogue should be to manifest character, not to fog it; and, properly handled by an artist who knows how, conversation in fiction is a tremendous force. Especially is it important to arrange that the first words spoken in the story or play by one of your persons exactly denominates him, classifies him, gives him individuality. The selection of his words, the accent, the length of his sentences, the similes and metaphors—these are something different as one character differs from another in taste, temperament and education. The metaphors, for example, employed by a deep-sea sailor are not those of a city clerk or a racing tipster. Each speaks according to his nature and environment.

The supreme test of dialogue is when it is so distinct and characteristic that it is unnecessary to add any reference to the speakers' names. The reader can follow pages of this kind of conversation without effort, because the mental impression needs no sustaining. It is to him as

if a dictaphone had been present to record exactly what was said and had then reproduced it, without the addition of such words as 'replied Millie,' 'stated Smith,' 'shouted the other.' Such explanations become superfluous until some other character is brought on, or a particular emphasis is needed, or you wish to introduce variation.

Nowadays the reader insists on far more dialogue than in the days of the old novelists. Those endless pages of description and philosophy are no longer tolerated, for the reason that all life has quickened since those days. We think and move and act more rapidly and we are less patient; there is no time to waste over matters which are not vital. In fact now that so many dramatists publish their plays with such detailed and well-written stage instructions (led by Mr Bernard Shaw) the difference between the printed play and the printed novel is becoming smaller and smaller. Quite recently I came across two novels by quite separate authors, which were nothing else but dialogue throughout except for the slightest descriptions. One of these had already been accepted for the films, but with very little alteration it would have lent itself to adaptation for the stage.

Some authors excel in structure, others in dialogue. At his best no one was better in play structure than Sir Arthur Pinero, few dramatists could give you a more finished portrait, especially of women. And yet his dialogue so often is artificial and stilted and self-conscious. The perfect artist satisfies us by that complete harmony which exists between character and expression,

so that all art is concealed and there is no barrier existing between the reader and the people he is depicting. For the uses of dialogue are not confined to expressing character : they help in pushing forward the action of the story, enlivening the interest, denoting suspense, suggesting something that is to happen and indicating that which is past. Very useful, too, is dialogue between a group in throwing light on the character of some other person not present. But whether it be short story, novel or play let this rule be observed : never use dialogue for its own sake. If you examine carefully a good painting, you will notice there are no superfluous touches but a directness of effort and an economy of method to bring about one smooth whole. Talking for the sake of mere talking is horrible enough in social life, as anyone knows that has travelled in a train with a garrulous passenger who tells you nothing about the weather and politics that you could not have told him far more readily. But in a work of art aimless dialogue is a sin. Unless it has some object such as the manifestation of character, development of the story and so on, it is not merely useless but a drag. And as soon as you come to write for the theatre, where every line and every syllable are of the utmost value, you will realise still more the importance of this rule.

Just as you dislike verbose people in your daily life, so in your stories do not let your characters run on like the babbling brook but rather like the waves of the sea, which usually run, as observers

will tell you, in threes. The conventional limit imposed on the stage consists of three lines, and though this is a general rule and not to be obeyed strictly, yet the more you break up your dialogue even in a novel, the less are you inclined to weary the reader. After all, the sphere of art is to convey pleasure ; and if you hand out pages of long-winded, unbroken dialogue you are not entertaining, but preaching or lecturing. In conversation with a friend, do you allow him to talk like that ? Do you not punctuate his remarks with some query, do you not find yourself interrupting with some exclamation, or seeking to illustrate by your own experience the statement which he has made ? Perhaps at the height of your friend's speech, when you are all eager to know what comes next, and you want to say "Yes ; go on," a third person enters, and the conversation receives a new twist.

If, then, such are the conditions in real life, why not transfer such faithful features to your dialogue which aims at reality ? Your characters must not speak as if they were reciting from a drill book, nor as if they were spouting the author's opinions. We don't want any of that ; all that we ask for is truth. Therefore a flapper will not talk as a professor, she will be colloquial, she will speak in character and say "shan't" instead of "shall not." And where you come in as an artist is that you select out of her vocabulary the most telling words and phrases ; the most salient, concentrative points which will exhibit with the utmost economy this impetuous, live creature.

Thus we come back once more to the importance of observation in the quest for truth, and no author can afford to relax his vigilance in this respect. Not so long ago one of our greatest emotional actresses achieved a veritable triumph by the wonderful manner in which she acted the part of a person who had gone mad. Little did the audience know that this actress had spent days in the grounds of a lunatic asylum watching and studying the ways of these unfortunate people. She was able to see for herself the truth ; it remained only for her to select and compress these impressions into a compact, artistic whole. "When I was writing *The Shadow of the Glen*, some years ago," stated Mr J. M. Synge, "I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen. This matter, I think, is of importance, for in countries where the imagination of the people, and the language they use, is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form. . . . In a good play every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or apple." And, let us add, the same law applies equally to the novel and the short story.

"Speak for yourselves," then, should be the attitude of the fiction writer towards his characters. In a subtle way, without their knowing it, the readers or audience will thus find they

have acquired a perfect understanding of your people and their theme. I do not deny that a certain amount of description is essential in the novel or short story, or that analysis will assist in penetrating into the psychology of the character ; but these tricks of the showman should be kept well under control or you will oppress the persons of your fable. Self-revelation by speech and action will convince far more easily and effectively than any mere statement. If you are told by a friend that a certain person is a fool or a conceited *poseur*, you do not necessarily accept that statement ; you prefer to suspend your opinion until you have met the person and judged for yourself. Being a liberty-loving creature yourself, with your own powers of perception, you insist on forming your own conclusion from a given set of premises, and that is exactly what the reader chooses to do in the novel. You may devote, if you like, a whole chapter to asserting that the hero is clever and cultured, but unless he says and does clever things, the reader will not accept your valuation. He will take nothing for granted except what he deduces from the characters themselves.

And just as the composer changes the speed of his music for certain effects, so the author accelerates or retards his dialogue. In the cinema theatre when a train is shown getting up speed and rushing over mountains and down valleys ; or a motor car is racing furiously after a thief, the orchestra by quickening its time intensifies the emotion which the rushing train or racing car

arouses in us. There is cumulative effect. So alter the time and speed of your dialogue as required. In a narration of pathos it can be slow and solemn to fit in with the subject. Then something happens, the height of interest is raised, the heart of the story beats more quickly, the emotion becomes more tense, there is keener excitement ; and thus the dialogue becomes more rapid, the sentences are shorter, the words even clipped to conform with the feelings of the persons uttering them. Think of any quarrel or heated argument at which you have been a spectator. Did the duelists use long words, big sentences, running into deep paragraphs ? On the contrary, the words came like short, sharp stabs ; swift and smart.

All fiction is but the representation of character expressing itself in action, and speech is part of action. From his dialogue you can see into a man's character, into his brain and heart, into his past and present, into his fears and hopes. A confused, ill-assorted mind will produce careless, badly arranged sentences, full of redundancies, contradictions and confusions. You must of course present this if you employ such a character ; but actually you will winnow and prune and limit while not losing the essentials. Everyday speech is lacking in compactness, and the position of words is not selected with regard to emotional effect. This is the artist's task. Rearrange the words so that the climax—the point of greatest interest—comes nearly at the end of the sentence ; let the big, weighty words be banished to the

end likewise ; get the right rhythm, balance and inflection. In this work of selection you have made the sequence of ideas clearer, you have brought about a stronger result without impairing the sense and nature intended.

But speaking generally, if the characters are to you alive and clear, give them a free rein ; let them express their emotions in their own way, and check their dialogue as little as possible, keeping yourself as much in the background as possible. The audience or readers don't care a brass nail for you ; it's your characters and the story they want. If you are writing a play, remember that your dialogue is intended to be spoken rather than read, and the only way to judge its value is to test it not by the eye but by the ear. That was in a large measure the successful reason of the plays by those French dramatists Robert de Flers and Gaston-Armand de Caillavet, authors of *Le Cœur a ses Raisons*, *L'Habit Vert* and a number of other productions. In describing their mode of collaboration Monsieur de Caillavet once remarked : "When we come to the dialogue, we talk it to each other ; thus is it *made*, not *written*." See how naturally the following lines flow, see how character is expressed merely by means of dialogue. These lines are taken from *L'Amour Veille*, one of the most popular plays which they ever wrote. Ernest is a pedantic bookworm, and the scene is in his study, and the time is evening. Jacqueline is a charming young wife, jealous of her husband and therefore foolishly determines to let Ernest

make love to her. Jacqueline is timid, but Ernest is elated at being loved by this fascinating woman.

Ernest. Let me—let me—take you in my arms.

Jacqueline. Yes—do.

Ernest. Let me kiss you.

Jacqueline. Yes, yes, do that—do everything.

Ernest. My dearest—what joy, what happiness.
(He kisses her.)

Jacqueline. (Running from him.) No, no, no, no—leave me.

Ernest. (Following her.) Jacqueline ! Jacqueline !

Jacqueline. No, no, don't.

Ernest. Jacqueline !

Jacqueline. (Terrified.) Leave me. (She climbs to the top of the step-ladder which leads to the highest part of the bookcase.)

Ernest. . . . I had imagined a different sort of rendezvous from this.

The words are few, yet they are expressive of the different characters all the time and you can even in reading, without seeing the play and the gestures, visualise the persons because the authors have selected only the salient points of the dialogue. The short speeches come right across to you full of warm life.

Soliloquy is out-of-date in the theatre, and even in the novel it should not be used when dialogue will do as well. This applies to speech, for it was a wickedly inartistic convention and a very clumsy method. But soliloquy of action is quite another matter, and may be used with

immense effect both in the novel and the drama. Suppose a man is about to go to his execution. Instead of receiving the news, as he would in the old-fashioned stories and plays, by bursting into a long declamatory speech beginning with "Merciful Heaven" and working himself up into a paroxysm of passion, it is nowadays more artistic and far more appealing if he *says* nothing—but by gesture, by silence profound and impressive, shows us all the terror that is going on in his mind, the struggle to be brave and the final resignation. On the stage we see this for ourselves, without a word being spoken for perhaps five big minutes ; in the novel, by economy of material the author depicts this scene to enable us to see all that is being felt. He can even go further still and bring out all that is passing through the soul of the condemned man—his thoughts and conflicting emotions. The success or failure of this effort will depend on the novelist's ability to avoid the melodramatic and keep close to truth. In blunt but expressive language, he must avoid 'slopping over.'

In the manipulation of dialogue care must be taken to avoid finality. Conversation is a state of continuity between two or more persons, and the end of one speech must not be a separate, independent unit but must dovetail in with the next. The transition must be natural ; one idea following another in sequence and not arranged collaterally. A sound principle is to have one idea to a sentence, one thought in a speech, and the connection can easily be made by the remarks,

queries, comments and answers of the other characters. When you polish up the dialogue, you will give it that upward sweep, that beautiful curve ; but be careful that in this idealising process you do not lose the nature of the speech. Charm and beauty, grace and rhythm it must have ; but above all things it must be sincere and natural. If the characters are not themselves charming, we cannot get that quality into their utterances. But the representation of human beings, expressing their character in emotional and significant words, truly revealing themselves in conversation which directly arises from the situation, and is not dragged in for effect ; this is to be our aim.

If you must err, let it be in the direction of sincerity. Rather let the persons of your story speak exactly as in real life, without any artistic control on the part of the author in respect of selection and polish ; rather let their conversation be the blunt realism than the anaemic, bookish or oratorical, unnatural stuff which sends a shiver through every reader who loves truth and hates sham. So long as you let the characters have their independent life, they will speak according to their own natures. If they are humorous people they will say amusing things ; if they are impulsive they will use short sentences, leave them unfinished and go off at a tangent, and rattle along at a great speed. But don't try to make a dour person say funny remarks, or a heartless villain suddenly burst forth into sentimentality. It is perfectly true that in real life people, under

the stress of certain emotions, sometimes perform unusual acts. If you propose to exhibit this unusual and amazing effect you must prepare your reader for it ; you must show the character's latent susceptibility to a certain influence, and the great power which is exercised. But even then, unless you are dealing with lunatics, it will not be permissible to capsize their natures absolutely. Make no mistake about it : your reader will at once recognise that your dialogue is true to life or true to mere convention.

Some novelists are fond of introducing into their story extracts from the private diaries, or whole letters from the people in the story. A little of this is perfectly legitimate, though it is rather a lazy way of showing what is done normally by conversation. The method is too hard and formal, has not the flexible give and take which you find in dialogue, and therefore there is lack of effect. Dialogue looks well on the printed page, attracts by its appearance, and helps to capture the reader's interest. Too often when you come across a story which has very little dialogue there is plenty of evidence that the author had written it in a hurry, without stopping to realise the characters or to let them live their own lives and speak accordingly. It is far easier for him to sit down and describe than to recreate ; and the result is for the reader a mere sketch, just a scenario when he was expecting drama.

Let us repeat, then, and conclude that dialogue must be characteristic, must be true to life, must

be representative of the traits of each particular person. It exists primarily for the purpose of manifesting human nature, but it is also part of the action which advances the story, and it is employed to indicate the setting. Like character, you select the dialogue from real life, only winnowing what you want. Your guiding principle is sincerity, your aim is truth, appealing to the reader or audience through their emotions ; and your art is the combination of accurate observation, choice, and right presentation.

CHAPTER VII

SCENE AND SETTING

IF one were to select a certain subject of propaganda and to consider whether the means employed should be a treatise or a story, which would you expect to be one most readily understood by the public ? The answer is that the mind assimilates facts more easily when they are expressed in pictorial form.

Now a novel or a play is fact in illustration ; it is a reflection of life itself. So far we have seen that in the elements that go to form a story there must be characters, there must be action, and there must be dialogue. But that is not enough. We must know also the circumstances, the setting, environment, time, place, moral surroundings, atmosphere of the action, otherwise the drama has no relation to life, but is something abstract, apart.

Nor will mere generalities of scene and setting satisfy. If the author puts his characters into a certain situation the surroundings must be particular and not general. The character of a man is shown in the way he keeps his study or in the orderliness of his office. Look at the arrange-

ment or disarrangement of his table, and at once you have the key to his mind. A woman's drawing room, in the same way, is indicative of her character. Thus if you lay your scene in a garden, it must not be any garden but a garden of particular features, and suitable as the environment for whatever characters and situations therein occur. If the action takes place by day, it must be a particular time of the day. The reader is not going to accept vague generalities : he wants life, and life is something definite, something particular.

Thus, once more, selection comes in at the beginning. From the whole world, with all its effects under sun, moon, stars, heat, cold, light, shadow, storm and calm ; from palace, mansion, cottage, hut, hotel ; from back streets and country lanes ; from office and the open veld the artist is able to select just those pieces of scenery which suit his purpose, and then readjust them, re-compose them, and contrast them until the whole produces the exact effect. If characters are to converse, obviously they must meet somewhere and under certain plausible conditions. But if the hero and heroine meet in a railway station or the hall of an hotel it is something different in intensity from meeting on a bleak moorland in the height of a thunderstorm or in the heart of a forest when the moon is at full. Certain conditions of place and time are attuned for certain events. In the sensitive fabric of an artist's being they strike corresponding notes, they suggest certain themes. There are plenty of examples

of this in almost every author's experience. Some have this sensitiveness more than others, but Robert Louis Stevenson was especially susceptible to this form of suggestion.

Do you remember the time, for instance, when he was living at Saranac Lake in the Adirondacks ? Mr Lewis Hind, who recently visited the cottage where this great teller of tales for some time existed, says that the Stevenson Society has now dedicated it as a memorial and on the side of the bronze figure which shows R. L. S. in his big fur-coat and cap is the following quotation by way of inscription, which many will recognise :—“ I was walking in the veranda of a small cottage outside the hamlet of Saranac. It was winter, the night was very dark, the air clear and cold, and sweet with the purity of forests. For the making of a story here were fine conditions. ‘ Come,’ said I to my engine, ‘ let us make a tale.’ ”

The result was that he began to write *The Master of Ballantrae*. It was Stevenson, too, who wrote that “ The effect of night, of any flowing water, of lighted cities, of the peep of day, of ships, of the open ocean, calls up in the mind an army of anonymous desires and pleasures. Something, we feel, should happen. . . . Some places speak distinctly. Certain dank gardens cry aloud for a murder ; certain old houses demand to be haunted ; certain coasts are set apart for shipwreck.”

Thus in making your selection as to locale you will know by instinct which is the right kind

of background for the action that is to take place. In proportion as this environment is carefully observed, selected and recomposed, so will your characters seem more truly and really to fit into the scene. A big storm of wind, thunder and lightning, with its variations of lights and darkness, its ominous patches of calm and noise, may well be employed to synchronise with a great emotional storm. In that popular novel *The Blue Lagoon* Mr de Vere Stacpoole gave us instances of the combination of great forces of nature and the great workings of humanity. On the lonely, desert island we see the plain, simple love of the boy and girl, and the ensuing primitive passion. Then, later on, while Emmeline is wandering in the forest, a hurricane bursts over the island. Dick searches for her in vain, until at daybreak Emmeline returns with a tiny scrap of humanity that has been born during the great upheaval of nature.

Such tremendous situations, therefore, become also to us tremendous because they have been presented not scientifically with cold reason as in a treatise, but emotionally as in life. Emotion is a far greater force in our actions and the progress of the world than is pure reason. Love, patriotism, courage, sacrifice contain as their motive power far more sentiment than they contain logic. And, since this is so, no artist can afford to omit giving to scene and setting that same consideration which he concedes to character and action. The stronger and more passionate the situation will often be best placed in the

simplest surrounding ; the more refined and complicated tangle will find its correct atmosphere in the more intricate conditions of modern civilisation. Someone said once that given three emotional actors, of whom one is a woman, you want no more scenery than a table and two chairs. Any place and any time will suffice for the setting. In this general statement there is a particular truth, for it is character which matters most, and both action and setting are inseparably linked up with character.

At the beginning of this century we passed through a period when atmosphere in the novel and scenery in the theatre seemed to be allowed to dominate the characters ; nor is this influence yet dead. When Shakespeare wrote his plays he thought of an uninterrupted story, to be shown in action with only breaks suitable for the convenience of the audience and a minimum of regard for background. To-day, when a dramatist writes his story, he has to visualise the setting and arrange the moves of his characters so that they will fit in with the scenery. The scenic art is something which had not been developed in the sixteenth century either in England or France, but by the latter country in the nineteenth. Just as marine painting is a comparatively new thing, so is scene painting for the theatre ; but so long as it assists and does not retard the presentation of human character, it is not merely legitimate but in every way to be encouraged. It heightens the effect by means of the senses to the emotions.

In the same way sounds, whether heard off or on the stage, assist our imagination and make the story more real and moving. Consider the dramatised version of Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina" which was produced in Paris some years ago. In this play by Monsieur E. Guiraud the plot was much rearranged, and the theatre version was a somewhat free adaptation. This is what a critic wrote of its presentation at the time, and I have kept this impression by me because it shows how scene and setting can be employed most nobly to help the story. From the language of this critic you can easily see that the employment of modern adjuncts to the stage had the desired effect of strengthening and not weakening.

"The staging, also, is equal to the acting. The final catastrophe, which verges on the melodramatic in the novel, is wrought with admirable taste on the stage. The cottage among firs and pines in which Wronsky, wearied, and Anna, despairing, have lived a year of jarring feelings, overlooks the railway cutting and the plain of the thousand-domed Moscow beyond. But the railway line is invisible, and one sees only the telegraph wires running above it. Anna has just heard of Wronsky's faithlessness. A bell sounds in the distance, then the far-off rumbling of the train. She starts at the noise. The train is that bearing Wronsky and his betrothed to Moscow. The rumbling gradually grows nearer. Anna takes her horrible resolution and walks slowly down the path to the line. Now the noise

is just upon us, and the train just outside the scene. She runs down and is out of our sight. At that instant the smoke and steam of the train go by above the cutting in a cloud, the thunder of the passing express reverberates as the stage shakes. You feel you know that the woman was on the line, and that the train has crushed her. A shriek from peasants, who have seen it all, a wild alarm whistle from the engine as the train is stopped past the house, inmates rush out, and the curtain falls. It is one of the most artistic bits of staging I have ever seen."

If this same story, as above worked out, were being written to-day not by a playwright but by a contemporary novelist, merely using the paragraph just quoted, as a scenario, the author would have to get all this setting, the cottage and pine-trees, the mood of Anna, the distant Moscow, the railway cutting ; the sound of the train, its effect on Anna, her tremendous resolve, the mounting up towards a climax collaterally with the approach of the train and the increasing of the noise—bell, vibration, perhaps a whistle as it came on round the corner—by means of the printed word without any other means of appealing to the reader's excitement. To do this, to make the reader live in the picture, feel the vibration of the train, see the smoke, hear the shrieks of the peasants, would be impossible unless the author had first visualised it for himself in perfect detail, and then from the fullness of his vision and his enthusiasm for his subject conveyed this dramatic scene by the right choice of words, the

correct emphasis here, the subtle contrast there, the omission of such unnecessary details as the number of coaches in the train and other points noticeable yet not requisite for the mental picture.

The art of the novelist is therefore that of one who is working single-handed with only the reader's sympathetic imagination to co-operate. Like the juggler who is throwing balls up into the air and catching them with one hand, but with the other hand he is spinning plates ; the fiction writer has to keep the characters advancing the story, while at the same time the shifting scene with all its details is kept ever before the reader clear and definite. No wonder that so many novelists forsake writing novels as soon as they find they can write plays. There are certain advantages which the novel has over the theatre ; but when it comes to the task of conveying such hardly definable subtleties as atmosphere and charm merely by words, the novelist is up against one of the greatest difficulties that an artist could experience.

" See," says Mr Arnold Bennett, " a novelist harassing himself into his grave over the description of a landscape, a room, a gesture—while the dramatist grins. The dramatist may have to imagine a landscape, a room, or a gesture ; but he has not got to write it—and it is the writing which hastens death. If a dramatist and a novelist set out to portray a clever woman, they are almost equally matched. But if they set out to portray a charming woman, the dramatist can recline in an easy chair and smoke while the

novelist is ruining temper, digestion and eyesight, and spreading terror in his household by his moodiness and unapproachability."

It is worth comparing this attitude towards setting with the feeling already exhibited by Stevenson, and the conclusion at which we arrive is that while the novelist is handicapped, and those who succeed in making the reader feel atmosphere and charm, have every right to be called skilled, yet personal sensitiveness and susceptibility have something to do with the matter. There are those who are fascinated by a chess problem, yet in whom the sound of music makes no pleasing excitement. There are some who have the temperament for playing bridge but are unmoved by the beauties of a Gothic cathedral. There are writers who, knowing their own capabilities and limitations, give us novels of character rather than of incident. There are others who are more interested to convey to us the spirit of the place, as showing its effect on character, rather than making the scenery and setting distinctly subservient to the action of the persons. Conrad and Stevenson at once rise as examples of this. It is readily conceivable that in the case of any writer who has spent a large part of the most impressionable period of his life at sea, or in the tropics, on lonely plains, or in wild mountains, that setting will dominate his story ; and that, unlike the man who has lived all his life in cities, this representation of nature will come easily and with little effort. The aspirant will therefore choose his particular theme accord-

ing to his disposition and experience, remembering always that he should write of the things that he knows and not of what he imagines. I know one case of a modern novelist, who wrote so convincingly of Italian scenery, that one of this writer's readers could not believe that the author had never been out of England. These cases are rare and are not to be taken as rules.

In reading a story of the sea, or of Alaska, or of the East, you can tell before many pages are turned whether the author has been to the scene of his fable, or whether he has merely 'got up' his environment from inside the British Museum. Either he will very soon make a howler, or his writing will be akin to the speech of an inebriated man who is anxious to conceal his condition. In order to get your setting into the mind of the reader, you must be as full of the atmosphere as you are of the characters' psychology. Insincerity and ignorance in fiction-writing are very hard to conceal, and you had better not try. Every man and woman is an expert in some one thing at least. It may be anything from finance to fashions ; but whatever sphere of life you have found yourself destined to occupy, of that you ought to be able to write well and convincingly. It matters far less where the scene is laid provided you make it real. There have been tales of mean streets as of Ruritanian palaces ; and O. Henry used for his settings a store, a seat in the park, an hotel—just the everyday scenery with which he was entirely familiar. If you have expert knowledge of the Stock Exchange world,

write your story in that setting. Do you know all the jargon and life in the theatrical world? Let this be your atmosphere. What, after all, matters is that you give us a struggle, a contest, with interesting people, poor if you like, but worthy of our attention and working out their drama in surroundings that seem to have verisimilitude. That is all that the public asks of you and expects to receive.

In the first part, or exposition, of your story where you introduce your characters to your public, get your setting and environment and atmosphere before your readers as soon as possible so that they may attune their ears to the right note. By this I do not mean necessarily beginning with three or four pages of massed description, which only irritate many modern story-lovers. But if you commence your first chapter with action or dialogue, let the setting be indicated by subtle suggestions, by distributed, brief atmospheric effects worked into the pattern almost unconsciously. The first thing is to attract the reader's attention, the second aim is to retain it, and the third is to make it worth the reader's while to have listened to you. Having once started him off with a narrative that begins in an interesting action, you can then keep piling on your scenic effects, adding a bit here and there, suggesting more, and then varying a few paragraphs of dialogue with a short, well-worded picture of (for example) the dim-lit, barren hut set on the edge of the wreck-strewn coast, against which the ocean for centuries of mankind had

waged its cruel warfare. If you *feel* a scene or setting deeply, and have learnt the use of words, you can hardly avoid expressing the picture. Practice alone, and studying the technique of the great masters, will enable you to do this to perfection.

It is possible to combine in one character, action, dialogue and setting, as for instance in a story which leads off something like this :—

“ Come along now, I say—no, not a minute longer.”

“ But the jewels ? After working all night—is it likely ? ”

“ I tell you there’s someone coming. Listen ! ”

“ I can’t ‘ear nuffin’ Where yer put that jemmy ? What a life ! You ought to go back to selling motor cars. . . . Fat lot of good to me. . . . Don’t seem to ‘ave no ‘eart, yer don’t.”

“ Sh ! Someone speaking. . . . That’s his voice. I know it well. That’s the man I sold the car to yesterday.”

In this purely imaginary beginning we have used not a word of description, and yet from the dialogue the following facts are obvious to the reader :—That a burglary is being perpetrated, that of the two men one is of better education, the other is an old hand at the game. Further, that the man who has no heart for the job is one of those elegant young gentlemen who are actively engaged in selling motor cars, and that he is in the act of robbing one of his customers. By

the addition of one descriptive sentence it would be possible to let the reader know that the house was in Grosvenor Square and that the owner was the Earl of Ermine. We have begun the story with action, contrasted the two characters, shown a contest already proceeding, and captured the reader's attention, whilst simultaneously placing him in the midst of the setting. It is analogous to the experience of an audience who sees the curtain rise on a stage already set and the persons of the drama interrupted in the middle of their transaction.

Contrast the above with the more obvious and less skilled method of exposition in which the two characters would be described, the burglary would be explained, the scene would be detailed, and so on. All this would need much more space and would be a dull beginning, because a mere statement and not a picture would be afforded us. One must give credit for some discernment and ability to read between the lines on the part of the reader. It is not essential to put a ticket round the neck of each man labelling him "This is a burglar." The association of the ideas—jewels, jemmy, and two suspicious men—is quite enough to convey the requisite atmosphere and impression to any but the most unsophisticated reader. Therefore, as in characterisation, action and dialogue, the more comprehensive results that you can obtain by the fewest words, the greater is your ability as an artist. It is not so much the single, potent word or sentence that counts, as the general effect

produced, the impression created, by the employment of many subtle touches such as you always admire in the achievement of a master in the art of portrait-painting.

All healthy-minded people love the sunlight which illuminates all things and shows up the beautiful colours in their true beauty. Let your writing be colourful, let it be expressive of the joy of life, of the delight in the beautiful, let your words be tone-ful and tune-ful ; choose them for their values and not because they are hackneyed. Imagination is such a wonderful and precious possession, and ought to shine through your diction as good deeds in a naughty world. It is thus that you raise mere writing to the rank of literature even when speaking of the most matter-of-fact subjects. When Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch in writing of the old trade routes says :

“ You will see, as this little planet revolves back out of the shadow of night to meet the day, little threads pushing out over its black spaces—dotted ships on wide seas, crawling trains of emigrant waggons, pioneers, tribes on the trek, olive-gatherers, desert caravans, dahabeeyahs, pushing up the Nile . . . ”

you have truth set forth in pictorial setting, full of colour, full of charm. Let the same principle guide you in imparting hues and shades and tints into the word-painted scenery which is to be the background of the people whose actions you propose inviting us to attend.

CHAPTER VIII

THE NOVEL

WE have now obtained a general idea of the principles underlying all creative literary technique, and have seen that in addition to those elementary rules applicable to art of any kind, fiction-writing comes from observing characters whence, in turn, comes drama; but this drama connotes dialogue and setting. We have seen, too, that character plus drama plus setting plus dialogue equals story. It remains for us now to see all this adapted to suit respectively the novel, the short story, and the play both of the theatre and the cinema.

And first with regard to the novel. Inasmuch as stories are not stamped out of a machine, all identical and according to exact formula, it follows that in spite of the author keeping a check on himself to prevent his characters from working out their own fate, there will none the less be something personal in the story. Every writer in selecting his material and contrasts approaches the task from a certain angle or point of view. He has his own character, his own philosophy of life, his own dislikes and prefer-

ences, his own susceptibilities. The melodramatic mind will not make out of his materials a novel such as will satisfy the poet; and *vice versa*. The spirit, the temper, the tone of the novel, the direction in which the sympathy is placed, all these matters are dominated entirely by the author's personal attitude, just as the tone and spirit of a dinner-party are set by the host.

The time was when the novel was a mere means of diversion; just some 'light reading' to pass away an idle hour. To-day it has become not merely a mental recreation but a picture of life, an embodiment of truth, a study in humanity, less conventional but more sincere. The impress of the author's character is seen in no respect more clearly than in the degree of truthfulness with which he controls the development of his character. If, for example, he is a crank, this disposition will manifest itself in the attention devoted to certain groups of characters and the control of their drama. In other words the style of a writer is as real and powerful as it is difficult to define. You hear a novelist sometimes say "I loved that character, which I called Yolande, because she interested me so much. She was so human." And as soon as you turn to such a novel, you can see the loving sympathy of that author there displayed in the doings of 'Yolande.' He has devoted so much attention to her, and so thoroughly enjoyed doing so, that he has conveyed to you something of the same enthusiasm.

It would not be untrue to say of Mr Galsworthy's

novels that his sympathy is with the under-dog, that he is deeply affected by the injustice existing in the world, that he realises the intense seriousness of life. Thus he comes to the task of writing his stories with a certain attitude, and looks at his characters from a very particular angle. Another author might hold the scales more impersonally, and present his characters objectively ; but even then we should see the writer's pre-dilections and intellectual condition coming out in the meticulous care for style, the choice of words, the music of letters, the penetrative touches which suddenly unlock the secrets of a character's inmost being. Felicity of phrase, deft summarisation, treatment of background, suggestion of atmosphere, indicating the real spirit of place and persons, the ability to see life as it is, broadness of vision, these are too personal to admit of being taught. The novelist either has this equipment or he has the ability to acquire it by his own efforts ; or he is bereft of it. You cannot put it into him. Artists are born ; not made.

No one who does not love humanity, who does not find himself capable of sympathising with the joys and sorrows of other people, is fitted to write a novel ; for his whole duty is to exhibit mankind. Similarly, unless he can show us individuals and not merely types he is not a great artist. He may show us, for example, a family of which every member is tinged with avarice, yet each member must have its own temperament distinct and differing except for that one fundamental tie. Thus we shall see a group of

persons each with their own ideas and eccentricities, their own hates and loves, their own pleasures and tragedies. Because of the great space in a novel it is possible to show the members of this group in detail, to show the deep contrasts by gradual exposition and with far less compression than in the short story or the play.

The novel is a broad category, which embraces the stirring tale of adventure and the composition which reads more like a philosophical work than a mere yarn or fable. The joyous and exciting adventures of youth, the romance of love, the inner workings of the heart in men and women, the jealousies of the ambitious, the analysis of soul, are all fit themes according to the ability of the author, and the angle from which he proposes to write the story. One novelist will give a fine, broad picture, a big scene full of people and with a wonderfully real background ; he will make everything amazingly vivid, all the characters life-like, observed with minute eagerness, and work up to a central situation of magnificent dramatic intensity. Another author will set to work in a quite different manner and give you a small, detailed study of a handful of persons, concentrating on them, with never a very dramatic situation, yet all the time we are made to realise their personalities to an extent that is almost uncanny. Every shred that hides the characters' soul is torn aside, so that if we have a small picture it is extraordinarily life-like. We recognise that the author has bothered less about the material aspects than of the spiritual part

of his characters. He has not merely got inside their skins but into their hearts and minds and souls. It is thus that we get one of those novels where there is little action but a gallery of living pictures, individual and undeniably attractive as a study. We get not so much a story as a human revelation of longings and strivings, disappointments, failures and triumphs. We see the clash between what is material and that which is mental or spiritual, and thus we get drama all the time.

In the novel an author is enabled to show at great length, with a mass of detail, the tremendous effect which environment plays on the development of character. Thus, for example, you might as your theme select a man of fine feelings condemned to live in a narrow-minded city of no natural beauty. You could work out the story, showing how this sensitive being is contrasted with the smoke and ugliness of his surroundings, how inwardly he rebels from the universal money-making mood of the place, working the novel up to the big decision ; and finally, when his chance of freedom arrives, you have this man too weakened by his environment, too poisoned by his years of living in these conditions, that in spite of his will, he finds he has become a slave to his surroundings. To show this in a play would not be easy, but in a novel you can pile one detail on another, give example after example to show the struggle that is going on between the hero and his surroundings.

But it is one thing to get an idea, write out

a scenario and develop it : yet the whole of the author's skill is shown in making the people and scenes live. In the hands of a skilled potter, common clay can be turned into articles of exquisite beauty and value. He adds something of his own personality to the clay. So it is with the author. He can take the most ordinary circumstances, and persons to all appearances the most commonplace ; but by giving a new twist to these circumstances and observing in these persons certain traits which were not obvious, he builds up a novel which is fashioned merely out of what is very ordinary. The author, you see, has been able to concentrate and focus, and to multiply effects which have an enormous cumulative value.

And yet the aspirant who sits down to write his first novel must remember that the reader is more interested in characters than in mere themes ; in activity and incident rather than in a plain assertion. In the case of the former it is worth spending a considerable time before even writing out the scenario. It may seem lost labour, with nothing to show on paper ; but during this time the persons of your novel have been, so to speak, coming to life in your brain and working out the story for you. And when you proceed to the actual writing of the chapters you will notice they will flow forth easily. During this period do not expect to find that you will avoid what Sir Arthur Pinero described once as "days of gloom and discouragement, and other days, again, of feverish toil, the result of

which proves in the end to be misapplied and has to be thrown to the winds."

You may have an inspiration for a splendid story, only to find after spending much thought and developing the characters, that it works itself into a blind alley. It is a grievous disappointment to you that so original a plot should thus develop; but many other craftsmen have had a similar experience, and you must have sufficient courage and resolution to scrap in time what is unsuitable. Eagerness should be the impelling force, but it should be controlled by discipline, and the story should not be allowed to run away with you. Often enough a young writer starts off all enthusiasm and keenness to get the story out of his brain on paper. The first fifty pages of the book, written at white heat, read excellently, but then there is a drop in the enthusiasm, the novelist becomes tired and worried and despondent. Spontaneity gives way to sheer hard work, the characters become less convincing, the dialogue is not so natural, and the incidents are a little forced. The only thing to do in such a case is to be prepared for such an experience. The novelist must pass through the valley of despair as well as over the mountain-tops of happiness, and must expect to encounter days of dullness. Put the manuscript aside for a while and concentrate your mind on something else: then return to it with fresh enthusiasm. It is inevitable that some part of the story should be less interesting than the rest, inasmuch as the novel may be anything from 70,000 to over 100,000

words. But arrange it that the first part and the last few chapters grip the reader. During those days when the first enthusiasm has worn off, you are really passing through a period of testing. If you genuinely love writing fiction, you will survive these trying hours, but if you are merely experimenting and are not prepared to suffer and endure that you may at length succeed, you will quickly throw aside the task as requiring too much effort and not worth while. First must come the apprenticeship which is essential in all crafts, and even after this you must pass through those dull patches which are the annoyance of every artist but are not to be regarded as more than temporary.

In the serial story such as runs through the popular magazines and daily papers the first chapter is everything. You are appealing to an immense public, everyone of whom is to be interested by you. That may seem a tall order, but it is met by considering what is that common denominator which brings all classes of readers down to the same level. The answer is that everyone has emotions to be thrilled, sympathy to extend, and curiosity to be satisfied. If therefore you succeed in presenting in the first instalment characters who are easily recognisable as human beings, whom fate leads into interesting situations, whose hardship any reader could sympathise with ; and end this instalment with the central character or characters involved in a tangle of circumstances, the reader will be anxious to read to-morrow's instalment in order to see how

the characters get out of the difficulty. The object of a serial is to peg down and maintain a steady sale of the paper. Therefore every instalment should hand on the interest from day to day. In love stories this is done by a succession of incidents, in detective or mystery stories by some sudden and unexpected new clues being discovered, so that the reader must read the next issue of the paper to see how the story goes on. A serial novel is like a railway viaduct which is supported on many arches of small span. The novel intended for the public getting its stories through the bookseller is built over fewer arches but of greater span. It is not necessary to end up each chapter with a thrill or a situation of intense interest ; for the reader has the book in his hand and, unless it is very dull, the novel will be finished without break of interest.

Seeing that everyone has a heart, it follows that a serial story of great heart-interest will appeal to an enormous public. Serial-writing will not permit of the intricate analysis of character that you find in certain novels, nor is the gradual development of personality here possible. Space in newspapers is a valuable commercial asset and is sold to advertisers ; therefore the story must arouse interest from the first and the reader must be immersed in the human interest without being bothered with side-issues or extraneous refinements. He says he wants a good story, by which he means clear-cut characters easily understood and plenty of incident. He cares little for subtleties of temperament, but he

wants to be shown plainly with whom he is expected to sympathise and whom he is to suspect. In serial-writing as in every other species of literary work there is a technique of its own to be learnt, and having once mastered the principles of fiction-writing generally, the aspirant can do nothing better than study for himself the serials which are printed in almost every journal to appeal to the masses. Make your characters worthy of sympathy, present human nature sincerely but simply, let your hero and heroine be idealised far more than in a book-novel, physically attractive, yet in no way liable to offend the susceptibilities of the British matron. Passionate love scenes, for instance, must be spiritual and above the domain of sex. The hero must be of the 'big, silent, strong man' type and the heroine must be of the highest moral standard but unconventional in behaviour, worthy of the strong man's love, independent of character, getting into difficult situations but finally emerging unscathed. Misunderstandings, jealousies, intrigues ; a 'villainess' who spreads false reports or puts a wrong construction on events ; the separation of hero and heroine in consequence ; the reckless, impoverished, gambling, dare-devil father of the heroine —these are some of the ingredients which go to make up the heart-appealing serial story. Each journal has its own ideas and you will have to modify the ingredients accordingly, but originality is not demanded so much as true-to-type, extraordinarily human, persons who appeal to the emotions of moderately educated readers.

A happy ending to all the poignant situations is essential but it must be kept for the final paragraph of the story.

In all novels there must be good and evil in some form, for goodness exhibits itself not in repose but in action. A hero is not a hero until he conflicts with the obstacle in the shape of the villain, villainess, fate, or some other difficulty. It is only by watching him suffering that he can win our sympathy, and by his gallant struggle (even if he fails) show that he has a right to our admiration and the love of the heroine. The greater the number and size of the obstacles he encounters, the more does he excite our interest. Remember that readers are a partisan class; they insist on taking sides and ranging themselves alongside the hero and heroine, and you must pander to this attitude if you wish to win the favour of the public. To write any novel is a great adventure, not to be undertaken lightly or inadvisedly, and the problems that arise must be met and not shirked. I mean, for instance, that it is bad art to get rid of a difficult character by hurling him into prison, or suicide, instead of giving yourself a little more trouble and letting the character work out his end reasonably and logically. Literary laziness or impatience is unpardonable, and the easiest way is often the worst way because it is false.

In the same manner the use of coincidence must be kept well in hand. To employ it as a method of solution is unwarrantable because it does not ring true, it is forced and unnatural.

You may use it as a premise, that is to say you may begin with hero and heroine meeting accidentally, but therefrom must spring the story logically and inevitably without faking. A thrilling story may follow because the characters find themselves naturally in thrilling situations, without the author forcing them. A humorous story in the same way develops quite naturally because you have begun by placing ordinary people into incongruous environment. A serious-minded old gentleman, for instance, suddenly bereft of his coat and waistcoat and compelled to walk down the Strand at noon minus collar and tie will cause every passer-by to turn round and smile in wonder. It is an incongruous situation and the public on the pavement wants to know why and how. In a humorous novel you could begin with this picture and then develop it to its conclusion.

Similarly a man in a hurry crossing Piccadilly Circus might hail a taxi-cab and find that a corpse was lying on the floor and a mysterious letter in the dead man's hand. Here is a strange coincidence, but from this beginning a logical and exciting adventure story with detectives and amateur inquirers at work could be unfolded. "Who killed Sir Jeremiah?" That is the theme which the reader is going to watch you unravel as soon as you have once made him acquainted with all the persons and circumstances. Surprise will follow surprise, one clue after another will turn out to be wrong, and many persons will be falsely suspected, until in the end, after the novelist has cunningly led the reader to believe

in one person's guilt, the very last character you would have suspected is the culprit.

Understand, then, before writing whom you hope to speak to. One class of public likes excitement and thrills, another wants no shocks but a pleasant easy-going romance with lots of sentiment, a third insists on very accurate character development. Unless you get this clearly into your mind, you will fail for lack of definite aim. The only universal satisfaction is afforded when the characters are in themselves attractive and delightful. When one of your women characters is so fascinating that all men succumb to her wiles, there is something about her which will make your readers succumb. When the impression of liveness in your characters is adequately conveyed, you can be sure that you are on right lines, and the modern, restless, unsatisfied heroine with the bobbed hair and out-spoken ideas will be recognised by the public as something real. See that she acts as she is depicted from the first and does not develop along illogical lines. She may have no scheme of life other than the desire for fascinating men or, on the other hand, for ambition; but you must make up your mind as to which is her dominant trait.

When a reader is able to say of a novel that the principal characters are so excellently drawn that each might be a portrait from life, and that even the subsidiary characters are so full of interest that the author could, had he space, weave a story round them alone—then may the crafts-

man indeed congratulate himself that his fidelity to observation has been well rewarded. The reader appreciates this understanding which you have shown, and will demand your next book as soon as it comes out. In you he feels he has a friend who has taken the trouble to dig deep down into the sorrows and trials of the human race, and he is grateful because it embraces so much of his own experience of life. Nothing can take the place of this grip on character for the reason that you are writing for human people who have themselves suffered. Flaubert believed that the greatest writer was he who made himself the subtlest instrument for receiving impressions from the emotions of others, and such-like external things ; and then rendering these impressions in the most apt language.

All that the novelist has experienced in his own private life, education and reading ; his own personal taste, his own sense of the beautiful, his own sympathies, his own pleasures and pains ; go to make up the preliminary training for his craft of representing the lives of others. For, though when we suffer we imagine we are unique, actually we are but repeating the experience of thousands of others throughout the ages. If to understand all is to forgive all, surely to suffer is to sympathise, and that is half way towards perfection in the novelist's art. In social life one often finds that a selfish, hard nature becomes transformed by pain and to take interest in the lives of others. Anyone who has undergone a critical surgical operation can place himself

in the position of another thus about to undergo the experience. And unless an author has lived and experienced he cannot write fiction. Therefore everything that happens to him for good or ill can be placed into his mental bank from which he can draw at any time those rich, ripe proceedings, adventures and happenings, which are to help in creating similar emotional effects in his readers. Thus nothing is wasted, nothing is superfluous in life as lived by the novelist

CHAPTER IX

THE SHORT STORY

IN the novel and the serial story there is room for many characters and a large variety of incident, but in the short story very few characters are possible and they may be concerned with one central incident. It is emphatically not a novel in a nutshell but a single episode, an important phase in the life of your chief character.

Like the novel and the play it must have its exposition, its generating cause, the ensuing struggle, the climax, the falling action and the satisfactory untying of the knot or solution. That is to say it is drama, but a concise form of drama in narrative form, and not a mere succession of incidents. Like the novel and the play it arises from character and is subject to the laws already examined with regard to plot, dialogue and setting. There must be adequate motive shown for incident, and the persons must act and speak in character.

But whereas a novel may begin with the hero's boyhood and cover the whole period of his life even to old age, the short story has room only for a crisis in this person's career. It is a mani-

festation of character under exceptional conditions, producing a single effect, with the smallest means and the greatest economy of words. Not all good novelists write good short stories any more than painters accustomed to using big canvases make good miniaturists. Within 2500 or at most 5000 words the writer has to show the environment, the contrasted characters, show the clash of wills and give a satisfactory conclusion. It is to be not a scenario—a mere statement—but a picture with everything about it convincing and life-like, exhibiting some human truth. In other words there is a kernel in the middle of the fable.

To excite the emotions of the reader towards sympathy, curiosity, fright or awe in so few words is not possible for every writer. And yet any editor will tell you that it is extraordinary to find in the shoals of short stories which pour into his office that authors have attempted a task for which they have no technical ability. Everything is wrong about the manuscript : there is no characterisation, no construction, no atmosphere, no consistency, no emotional appeal ; the author has not realised the nature of the short story, and has made every possible howler. What the editor looks for is the creation of a single impression, a well-built plot, a dominant character standing out head-and-shoulders above the rest, concerned with a big crisis and then a right ending to conclude. It is analogous to the one-act play, rather than to the novel, because of its singleness of effect.

I believe that never in the world's history was there such a demand for short stories as to-day. The increase of a public during the last twenty years that can read is a factor that has made possible the sale of so many magazines. The spread of education and taste, and the love of reading have, especially among women, created an appetite which is satisfied only with imaginative 'literature' (using the word in its widest sense). More ambitious writers would be able to sell their stories if they would only study the requisite technique and read the stories accepted by each class of magazine. To sit down and dash off a narrative and then post it off to *any* magazine instead of a particular magazine, without studying its customary contents, is the action of the imprudent and foolish. If you intend to succeed in writing short stories you must devote your attention to considering the market as well as to learning the technique. Don't worry too much about originality of theme as about freshness of treatment. Life is full of stories if you keep your eyes open for characters. A paragraph in a newspaper, an experience of an acquaintance, an incident within your own daily life, the interesting personality of a friend, a chance remark overheard in any assembly of people, a sudden inspiration whilst taking a walk, a portrait in an illustrated paper or picture gallery, an idea conveyed by a dream—any one of these may start you off with the material for a short story.

Then develop it, as shown earlier in this book, but with greater regard for conciseness and com-

pression and elimination of the non-essential. And remember once again, that there must be struggle or no story ; and that the greater the emotional crisis, the greater will be the story's success. Originality means seeing and revealing something which other writers failed to observe ; just that. If you can give a surprise ending to the story, as O. Henry was so clever in doing, so much the better, provided it is logical if unusual. If it is not reasonable, do not drag it in merely for effect. The reader does not want to be treated as a child without understanding or experience. The manner of telling your story, the way you set the reader's interest going ; the humorous and witty style of your writing ; the individuality and hypnotic influence are themselves original, and arise from your own personality.

What kind of stories do editors want ? The answer is this. The first essential of an editor is to know his public. Therefore if you consider what kind of fiction the public reads and enjoys, you solve the problem for yourself. Then how is it that my last story was rejected ? To give a correct reply there may be one or several facts to be known. The editor may have already on hand another story of that type, or your story may be either too short or too long, or your story may be just good without being above the average ; it lacks distinction and outstanding merit. It may be too late for a Christmas number and too early for the next ; or it may not satisfy the editor's personal whim. Besides these short stories which are on the border-line of acceptance, there are

others which have been rejected for such reasons as the following :—lack of plot, indifferent characterisation, unsuitable theme, bad arrangement of situations, faulty construction, old-fashioned ideas, melodramatic sentimentalism, unreal dialogue, uninteresting characters, objectionable plot, lack of emotional appeal, unevenness of progression—and so on.

Give your story a happy ending, say what you have to say naturally, be bright and avoid sad themes and miserable settings. Imagine your reader snatching an hour's rest at the end of a trying day, or longing to be entertained during a tedious railway journey. He wants to be taken out of himself, to be amused and not depressed. Give him sunlight and colour, the grandeur of the desert, the majesty of the sea, the rare air of the mountains and moors, the luxury of palaces, the sweet scents of gardens, the silver of moonlight, the rushing of mighty rivers, the souls of big men and the ardent love of beautiful women. Give him big themes where struggles rise to consummate heights and momentous decisions are made. Transfer him into another world of make-believe and cause him to get away for a brief period from his life of monotony and toil and disappointment, and let him see the glory of romance and the magnificence of imagination. Or, if you select just ordinary people in everyday setting show him the hidden humour and romance, the depth of emotion, the goodness of human nature which lie there unexpectedly and unseen. To do all this is not to overstep the

limits of probability but to idealise the actual. Make your reader laugh or weep with you, move him by suspense, get at his feelings, and by the time he has read your story he will be thankful to you for having given him a tonic and taken him away from life's weary round. I remember the case of a man who, whenever he was depressed or worried, used to take himself to see a melodrama or a sad play. Not merely did it relieve his feelings and act as an outlet to his emotions, but he was able to see his own troubles in their proper proportion. Not one of his anxieties could compare with those through which the people in the play had passed.

It need not be necessary to add that your scenes of passion should be clean and above reproach : if they are not, no editor will need your manuscript. Passion is in itself noble and a golden gift. Without it there is no love for mate, for art, or enthusiasm for any just cause or effect ; you cannot stir the hearts of individuals or crowds, you cannot work up an audience or a reader to a big scene. There is, then, pure passion and its debased counterfeit which is not currency. In your love scenes of great feeling you can make these convincing without being repellent as is the fashion among a certain school of modern writers. There is sacred as well as profane love, and though contrast, as we have seen, is a law in art, yet you can show that the waters of some rivers are not iridescent, without the necessity of stirring up the mud.

Like the play, but unlike the novel, the short

story is meant to be read at a single sitting. There must not be too much exposition, too much characterisation, too much incident but a compact blending and balance and emphasis. Motivation and characteristic dialogue are even more to be watched in the short story than in the full-length novel, and the ability to select and winnow is here especially important. Whenever you can let the situations express themselves, let them do so: an unnecessary word from the author may spoil the whole picture. Supposing, for instance, you have worked the story up to its great climax, to its emotional crisis, to its maximum intensity of interest. If you round this off with such a phrase as "Annette was too astounded to speak"; or "He looked at her, said not a word, turned on his heel and went outside," the situation is sufficiently emotional without requiring a page or paragraph of description. There are times when the fewest words convey the greatest effects, as for instance the parting of lovers, the resignation of a brave man to the inevitable, the visit of a widow to the lifeless body of her bridegroom. Such poignant pictures are too expressive to need more than the fewest touches. Delicacy with strength is therefore essential in writing short stories.

In preparing your short story act as if you were planning out the novel shown in a previous chapter, though it may not be necessary to write out the biographies of your characters with such detail. The interesting, gripping beginning is more important in the short story than in the novel.

Open never with a long paragraph, and best of all either with short dialogue or such exposition as will plunge the reader straight into the transaction. Thus you can indicate the tone of the story and suggest its atmosphere if you were to begin like this:—"What always struck you as soon as you entered the old mansion was its musty air which suggested a concentration of centuries. Its furniture and its habitants were in keeping with its prevailing odour." With this keynote the reader is put in a certain frame of mind to appreciate the ghost story that follows, or see the aged but artful butler scheming against his venerable master. With one touch you have suggested a certain environment and avoided a lengthy introduction. The reader responds to the spirit of the place. Here the importance of choosing colour-words such as 'musty,' and the alliterative effect of the letters c, n, t, and r in 'concentration of centuries' is to intensify this mustiness and bring it, so to speak, into the very nostrils of the reader.

Such an opening shows an unbroken narration, analogous to the rising of the curtain in the theatre 'discovering' a certain scene or a certain activity going on. Or, if the story is being related in the first person, you need not begin by saying "Two men were seated facing each other, the one pale and frightened, the other fat, forty and flourishing." Simply commence with the story already under way, such as : "Yes, cap'n, I saw him do it myself. I tell you there's not a man in the whole of Europe who could have made a neater or quicker

job." The reader quickens his interest, is taken by the hand from the first words of the story, his curiosity is piqued. You have therefore begun well, and it remains only for you to retain his attention and send him away satisfied. Begin your story, therefore, with something vital and gripping. Even if it is a humorous story you can suggest the tone by opening with some comic philosophy such as:—"There is never room for more than one fool in one family at one time. John Buggins was the representative bungler of the Buggins breed in the present generation, and every member of the household saw that he was kept reminded." The reader understands from this that he may relax his muscles, spread out his legs and be ready for a good laugh. There is only one danger in such a beginning: you have started out at a certain level, and you must maintain consistency. Don't give the reader high expectations unless you can gratify them with what he desires.

Like the use of contrast, suspense can be overdone. Its proper use is invaluable for keeping up interest and accentuating; but its abuse is fatal. A reader is capable of enduring only so much; and if you keep his nerves extended too long like a piece of elastic, he will have to let them go back to normal or there will be a break. In the short story a good principle is to introduce a breathless retarding, a delay of the action just prior to the big crisis, then follow this up quickly with the shortest possible falling action, and the surprise *dénouement*. If you can do this,

the reader has been swept off his feet and finds himself at the end of last paragraph before he has had time to realise it. Thus take the case of the central character in your story *The Coward Who Was Brave*, or whatever title you like to give it. You have shown in the previous part of the narrative that he was brought up to shun pain, and at school and in after life was regarded by his comrades as a coward. The ship has hit the rocks in a fog and split in half, there is no food in the forward part where half a dozen men will starve unless someone can swim across the surf with a line. ‘The coward’ is the only man left to do this, all the rest are women and children. The suspense is *will* he do it, will he act the man for once in his life, and probably the last opportunity in life? You can show him hesitating, the struggle going on in himself between duty and self-preservation. The psychological struggle ends in his taking a dive into the sea with the line round him and fighting his way—a physical struggle now—towards the forward half of the broken ship. Will he ever get there, will he not be overcome by the surf? At last he succeeds, the crisis is over, the line is attached, the food will be able to be hauled across. *But*—at the very moment when he had achieved, he failed. In that supreme act of succour he lost his own life, though a long career of failure was crowned with victory. And then one of the half dozen men adds the surprise ending that after all they had plenty of grub in the fo’c’sle and ‘the coward’ need not have lost his life.

In this rough undeveloped scenario we have 'the coward' as the dominant character and one dominant situation to produce a single dominant effect. That is a specimen of the law of unity in the short story. We have taken just one critical phase out of his life, shown briefly his character and environment, struggle, and so on. The crisis is worked up to by suspense and logically ; and then comes the surprise ending that it was in one sense useless to have lost his life. The reader, however, knows better. In this surprise ending he feels the emotional pleasure of seeing a man justify his existence by death, and retrieve his honour. Thus there is the subtle contrast between what only the seaman sees from his angle and what the reader, through the author's angle, is able to see for himself. In a novel employing this scenario, we could have begun with 'the coward's' boyhood and shown in action his upbringing and spoiling by his maiden aunts. Passing on to his school-days a chapter or two would show his sloth and unpopularity among other boys ; and the same theme could be developed during his undergraduate period. The unity would be this cowardly characteristic and hatred of effort, and it could even be shown to be hereditary. But, in order to prepare for the ultimate resolve of self-sacrifice, the reader must have been given convincing proof that there was some good in the man only awaiting to be incited. Whether the love for a girl or some other influence be selected for this transformation of character in a time of crisis is for the author to determine for him-

self. My object at present is merely to show how a short story theme can be treated to illustrate the rules already laid down.

This example, too, will suggest to the reader the manner in which he can write other short stories with one dominant character producing a single impression by one central situation. This principal character had undoubtedly other traits than cowardice, but this was his outstanding mark, and it is such that the short story has to deal with. Selection has to find what is salient and the focus has to be kept on that essential feature. And in such a story all the facts and circumstances will be made interdependent, interlocking. His reason for being aboard the liner can be made to arise from his desire to preserve health or to avoid some unpleasant duty ashore—perhaps after failure at home or in the colonies. No touch will be omitted that will prevent the picture from being convincing, and yet nothing superfluous will be allowed when once the impression has been conveyed. There will be surprise without coincidence. The ship will not suddenly hit the rocks but this will be prepared for by the approach of fog or by dialogue suggesting this is the time and place when fogs have been known to occur. Further, if the reader judges a story by the standard as to whether he has learnt in this way something more of life, he is satisfied by the inference that in every man, even in a coward, there is a spark of divine goodness only waiting to be set on fire. Life has thus been interpreted by means of a short story.

The sharp, crisp effect of the short story, then, has much in common with the novel yet is essentially more compact. It is something more than a sketch, a good deal more than a scenario, and quite different from a novel in a nutshell. There is no dispersal of interest but it has a unity of its own. It is well to begin the short story with the attention focused on the dominant character from the first, so that the reader may at once get to understand the trait exploited. The transition from exposition to struggle will be made skilfully, and the dovetailing will be neat and almost imperceptible. A colour-word here and there will suggest atmosphere and environment and setting. The importance of following the crisis with swift and compressed falling action and *dénouement* is for the purpose of avoiding the baneful effect of an anti-climax. The characters will be contrasted not in detail but in regard to the dominant theme.

In order to add verisimilitude to the short story it is worth mentioning names, actual places where this is possible, though the scene of the story can be fictitious and adjacent to real localities. Inasmuch as every word in the short story tells for or against the general effect, you should read over your manuscript and see if it is possible to use a greater economy. The test is : if part of any sentence were cut down would the story suffer in any way ? If the answer is in the negative, then the story will be better for this excision. In selecting the theme, consider first what are the emotions and instincts, common to all

men and women, which will be most productive when affected. Probably few things are more moving than self-sacrifice provided this is properly shown.

As an example of what can be done in the way of compression in depicting a character's appearance what could be neater than an American short-story writer's description of a retired sea captain as an "old chap with watery blue eyes and a lonesome-looking white patch of chin beard"? Such a brief summing up gives us the salient features which would immediately impress themselves when meeting him for the first time. With these outstanding traits we do not ask to be told what kind of a nose, a forehead or a mouth he had; a satisfactory impression has been conveyed to us, because he is a secondary and not principal character, and we can fill in the other details from our own imagination.

For the author who intends to devote himself to short-story writing there can be few better models than those stories which are published in the American magazines. For actuality and originality they reach a grade higher than the average that is found in our own journals. I do not seek at present to inquire why this is so, but simply state a fact which must be fairly obvious to those who have compared the two brands. Their worst stories are no better than our lowest grade, but their best are excellent in construction and succeed in maintaining interest with the cleverest manipulation of material. The result is that you feel you have been in the presence of real

people and that the author has kept discreetly in the background. Their originality is in their treatment, and it is in this respect especially that the aspirant will find it more than worth while to study their methods. But in the United States the sale of a magazine and the consequent revenue from advertisers is far greater than in Great Britain. The result is that short-story writers are paid on a much more liberal scale and thus encouraged to produce good work. In our own country, with very few exceptions, most fiction writers prefer to concentrate on novels or plays, for lack of encouragement in short stories, but all the same there are plenty of magazines open for those who have the right kind of stories to offer.

CHAPTER X

DRAMATIC TECHNIQUE, I.

COMPARED with the large class of people who write novels, and often very good novels, it is rather surprising to find that comparatively few write plays and, fewer still, plays that have any real merit. Certain fiction writers have recently complained that the day of the novel is over, that the competition is so keen and the remuneration, except in certain cases, so inadequate that it is doomed. If that is so, asked a well-known critic, why don't they invade the stage, which badly needs new playwrights ?

The answer is that very few novelists and others ever take the trouble to study the technique of playwriting, and yet there is no terrible mystery about it. The drama has its own conventions, its own limitations and formulæ like any other art, and it is mere conceit to expect to succeed until you have learned the rules of the theatre. Some authors find playwriting easier than writing novels, and *vice versa*. It depends largely on whether you have strongly developed in you the dramatic instinct and are familiar with many plays.

In the actual writing of the play there is less hard work than in writing a full-length novel, even in these days when the cost of composition has cut down the length of novels. Let us make a few comparisons in approximate figures. George Meredith's longest novel *Harry Richmond* contained 240,000 words; Hardy's longest novel is *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, which has 172,000 words; Robert Louis Stevenson's longest is *St Ives* with 172,000 words also. To-day the average length of a novel is somewhere between 70,000 and 100,000 words. The longest of Shakespeare's tragedies is "Hamlet," which is not more than 30,000 words. Ibsen's long play "Hedda Gabler" is about this length, Galsworthy's "Justice" contains about 20,000, and this is a rough average of most modern plays. Thus, at the very most, a play is only one quarter the length of a novel, and the working out of the preliminaries, before sitting down to write the story, is much the same.

Many people connected directly or indirectly with the theatre endeavour to make us believe that the technique of the drama is something too deep to be learned except *on the stage*; that it is a very difficult art in any case, and can never be acquired from reading plays or seeing them. This assertion is mere nonsense. Let it first be admitted that theatrical technique is something special and must really be learnt, and that without this knowledge no playwriting effort can expect to succeed; for the methods of the novelist and the dramatist differ widely. But having

said that, let us be quite sincere and confess that this art of the theatre is simply the application of common sense and experience to the limitations of stage and scenery. It is nothing in the least mysterious but crudely simple when you come to analyse it. If you mean to write plays, go to see the successful plays which are running after fifty nights, and then buy the book and go and see the play again. Then put the book on one side and write down in a hundred words or so a scenario of the play in embryo, not a detailed working out of the incidents but just a summary of the plot. Then, with this, begin independently to work out for yourself a play. Compare the difference in result, the selection and omission of incidents, the emphasis laid on which characters, the way characters are got on and off the stage, and so on. This is the way to get hold of technique, but this chapter may be useful to you as well, so read it first, by way of introduction to your study.

The construction of a play consists of exposition, struggle, climax, falling action and *dénouement*; so it has that in common with other imaginative writing. But you must be careful to give the characters a sufficient reason for coming on or off the stage or strolling around. This is one of the snags that trip up the inexperienced. Remember, too, that you must give your characters suitable lines to utter when leaving the stage, and of a suitable length. If, for instance, hero and heroine are having a quarrel in the centre

of the stage, and he decides to leave her, give him a phrase long enough to last him to the door.

As in other stories you will arouse curiosity, and reasonably satisfy it. Each act and each situation must advance the story so much, and interest must be kept going throughout. Select your lines so that they will speak well, however well they may read. A play is an appeal to the emotions through the ear and through the eye, and especially the latter. It must therefore lend itself to acting. From some of the efforts which are made by authors, one would think they had never been inside a theatre. I am thinking of the class of writer who has not troubled to realise the effect of the hero speaking a whole page of print in the big scene with the heroine. What does the author suppose she is doing all this time? You can do this sort of thing in a novel, but the theatre is too near to reality to allow such insincerities. Characters on the stage should speak like people in actual life—only more cleverly and with greater compactness.

The whole play must be built round its big situation ; everything works to and from that centre. Let the audience fall in love with the central figure, make his personality attractive. (Recall your impressions of such a play as "A Pair of Spectacles !") Action must spring from character, the situations must be probable, significant, dramatic and striking. Each one increases our knowledge of character or advances the story a degree further ; and in handling a situation

follow the principle of the play as a whole by rising to climax and then letting the wave of interest temporarily fall. At the end of each act there must be an effective curtain, which grips the audience and makes him want more. Thus, if there are three acts in the play, Act I will end on a note of expectancy, of suspense. Act II, after the big central situation (the obligatory scene, the great decision, the momentous crisis), will show the shadow of coming events, the impending fate in its curtain. Finally, Act III, after its period of suspense to the very last, brings down the curtain with a surprise ending of the solution.

It is this third act which is so troublesome to write, because it follows a big scene and because the conclusion of the play must not be suspected in advance. This is where the inventive ingenuity of the author must show itself. Each act, too, will be divided up into a series of 'scenes'; that is to say there will be a continuous succession of activities and dialogue with the shifting of characters to and from the stage. Each of these 'scenes' will have its beginning, its middle and end, and be careful that the succession is in contrast and not in similarity. A scene of great pathos can be preceded by one of light comedy, or sentiment. Thus, having begun the preparatory work as in the preliminaries to writing a novel, the dramatist with his characters and scenario before him sets to work. The big, central situation is to come towards the end of the second act,

so that is settled. He then makes up his mind as to the curtains and the ending of the whole play. With this map, so to speak, he knows where he is. His next duty is to divide each act into so many 'scenes,' and set down which characters will be in each 'scene' and what is the progress of the story thus to be made. When this has been done for the whole of the first act, he can rough out the dialogue of each scene. In doing this the best method is to let the characters speak as nearly as possible resembling life naturally and characteristically. Thus you get the verisimilitude; but having done all that, run through every word of the dialogue, cut out each superfluous syllable, improve the choice of words, alter their position in the sentence where necessary, and generally polish up until every phrase is full of character, smooth and expressive, not too long but well-balanced and rhythmic.

The stage directions will then be added, and these need only be clear and succinct, so as to convey an adequate idea of the setting and the movements on or off. Some modern playwrights cannot resist the temptation to let themselves go in these directions. It is the reaction of an imaginative temperament from the crude directions in the plays of the last century, and certainly assists the pleasure of reading. It does not, however, necessarily aid the presentation of the play and may even detract from it. That is to say, you may in reading the play get your ideas largely influenced from these clever direc-

tions, whereas the impression should come from the play itself. Unless the characters manifest themselves by their action and dialogue, and show their relations to each other quite clearly, without the author having to demonstrate these details, there is something basically wrong in the play, and it will irritate the audience. Clearness in exposition, clearness in motive, clearness in delineation of character, clearness in dialogue—everywhere you must have this virtue, because you are telling a long story in a few words. Let it be obvious to the actors how they are to interpret their parts, but do not make the parts so inflexible that an actor cannot slip inside. For, although nominally it is your play, actually you are only one of the crowd which consists of producer, actors and scenic artists and others. The first two especially may so interpret your creation that you see almost a paraphrase, a free adaptation of what was originally in your mind. This cannot be helped, for you are just one of the collaborators who bring about the achievement of illusion. Some of the most successful plays have had to be rewritten wholly or in part as soon as the rehearsals got going. I believe that the last act of that drama *Bull-Dog Drummond*, which had a prosperous run of about a year, had entirely to be written afresh just before the opening night, and I well remember the author of one of the big successes in another London theatre telling me that on the eve of the first night both dramatist and producer were at their wits' ends

and exclaimed : " This play resembles nothing on earth. What are we going to do with it ? "

The point is that even the most active imagination cannot always see the printed word as it will come out on the stage enacted by live people. The mere inflection of the voice, the emphasis in the wrong place, may alter the tenor of the play ; and there are many other difficulties which are manifest only from the time the rehearsals begin. This is quite apart from the temperament of the actor or actress who may insist that his or her personality is not being given full opportunity. He may even go so far as to assert that your lines are unspeakable and to throw up his part in disgust ; or he may allege that the part is not actable or the sympathy is too much with his foil. As a novelist-playwright remarked this year, as soon as the author has finished the manuscript of his novel, everything is finished with the exception of the proof-correcting ; but from the moment he has finished the manuscript of his play, his troubles begin. The answer to this is that the rewards of success in the case of a playwright are immensely in favour of the former as compared with the writer of novels.

In attempting to write for the theatre, have some regard for the limitations of the stage. There are big effects which they can carry out at Drury Lane but are impossible in any other London theatre. Many inexperienced playwrights even beat this by suggesting effects and scenes that not even the most able spectacular producer could

handle. Plays cost capital to be staged, and if you are an unknown author it is hardly likely that the capitalist is going to risk his money on costly scenery. If you are wise, you will confine your first play or two to ordinary interior settings or a garden, which are cheap. Better still make one scene do for all three acts. When that successful play *A Bill of Divorcement* was originally written, the second scene was Margaret's drawing-room ; but when the play was produced at St Martin's Theatre this was altered to the hall of the house, and so there was no scene-shifting but one setting did for the entire play, without any loss of effect.

In play-writing as in novel-writing it is as well to remember that the greater part of the public consists of women. Therefore, unless your drama interests that sex, you will probably not win a big success. Consider the themes which interest a feminine audience, allow an opportunity for your female characters to come on in beautiful dresses ; analyse feminine nature if you like, add sentiment too if you wish, but don't make it a political or a business theme, for these plays rarely succeed. Human affairs of the greatest intensity, a deeply pathetic central situation, a sob-part are meet subjects if only you have sufficient contrast especially in regard to humour. Everyone wants humour, and nothing in the theatre pays like a farce. There is humour of character and humour of situation. You can take a comic character, place him in ordinary

conventional environment and choose such incidents as will exhibit this humour, the other characters being selected as suitable foils. The contrast and interplay of the comic character with the others will bring about the story. Another author might start, as we suggested in a previous chapter, with a perfectly ordinary character in a comic situation, and then proceed to extract every ounce of fun from the ensuing incidents, each situation becoming more ridiculous than the last.

What is it that makes for humour ; why do we laugh ? The whole art of releasing fun is by presenting the incongruous which we consider from an angle of sympathetic superiority. In the case of the old gentleman rushing along the Strand minus coat, waistcoat, collar and tie, we feel somehow sorrow for him but it is with an air that we are superior to him. He is an unfortunate fool, yet a fool all the same. If, for a humorous theme, you choose as the subject of your jest human folly, ignorance, conceit, stupidity, arrogance, vanity, pomposity, clumsiness, awkwardness, hypocrisy ; and work any one of these out along the lines suggested but in a fresh setting, you are on the right road. Incongruity you must have, if you want humour.

Some years ago one of my friends was sitting in an omnibus when he noticed a poor woman with her boy who had his head enveloped in a saucepan, as if wearing a hat. Both mother and the ragamuffin of a child were looking pain-

fully serious, but the incongruity of this sadness and the iron saucepan caused the other passengers to shake with laughter until finally the woman in angry tones explained: "You'd larf too—I don't think—if you'd lost a day's work by 'aving to take 'im to the 'ospital all through playing in the kitchen." In the same way most of the laughs obtained by the old-fashioned music-hall comedians were obtained by appearing incongruously—a parson with a red nose, Dan Leno as a fireman or master of hounds, George Robey with his inimitable hat or dressed as a beef-eater, Harry Tate in outrageous clothes, with a boy in a silk hat, motoring. We laugh at the ignorance, the incongruity of it all. If in a modern play a female character suddenly appeared in the costume of twenty years ago, every woman in the house would be at once roused to mirth. The stalls would titter, the pit would laugh aloud, and the usual hysterical woman who always seems to be at the back of the gallery would go off into shrieks. And why? Because of the incongruity of the character's appearance.

The success of W. W. Jacobs' stories is not so much in the amusing dialogue of his characters as in the ridiculous situations they find themselves. The man who becomes engaged to more than one girl at a time, will be capable of much comedy making. The tug-master whose engineer mutinies and leaves the engines at full speed in the crowded Thames; the man who has been

left without his trousers and has to do some tailoring with a newspaper—all such situations are rich with incongruity and capable of being developed into a farce for the theatre or a story for a book.

It has been said that the function of a novelist is to tell the individual reader what the public does not know; and that it is the function of the dramatist to remind the audience of what the public has apparently forgotten. That may be, but generally speaking the aim of both novelist and dramatist is the same, though the method is modified. There are, of course, certain things to be avoided in the playwright's method. We have already alluded to the disuse of the spoken soliloquy. The telephone has nowadays frequently taken its place, but this useful instrument is being worked to death, and should be employed sparingly. It is a sure sign of the inexperienced amateur to open a play with servants telling each other things, which they know already, as a means of getting the exposition to the audience. Such a method is clumsy in the extreme. You can avoid this by beginning straight away at the right point with activity. Nothing that the audience has not been told matters; everything that follows is vital. Instead of the servants telling each other, we see for ourselves. The exposition explains itself. It is easy, simple, effective, as all art should be.

You are less inclined to be interested with what is antecedent to the play than with what is contained within the limits of these three acts. The

exposition in the first act of "The Second Mrs Tanqueray" is one of the best within recent times, because quite naturally and easily we get to know all about the characters while listening to a group of men having a conversation at the end of dinner. By the time Paula comes on as the generating cause at the end of this division, we are fortified with sufficient information to follow the rest of the story. The whole difference between the skilled and the unskilled dramatist is nowhere better seen than in the natural or unnatural method of exposition. The former will choose important characters, who have every right to be on the stage; the inexperienced will drag in servants, friends, telephones and subsidiaries with the sole purpose of letting the audience into the secret. Everyone except the unsophisticated sees through this device, and thus there is a big loss of reality.

"Keen expectancy, in short," says Mr William Archer speaking of the exposition, "is the most desirable frame of mind in which an audience can be placed, so long as the expectancy be not ultimately disappointed. . . . After all, however, the essential question is not how much or how little is conveyed to us in the first act, but whether our interest is thoroughly aroused, and, what is of equal importance, skilfully carried forward." The first thing is, then, to make sure you grip your audience in the exposition and to conceal the ingenious devices which you may employ to this end.

"The moment the play becomes so ingenious as to be noticeable," once remarked that successful dramatist Mr Arthur Jones, "at that moment it passes its limits, and convicts the playwright of an attempt not to paint human nature, but to show his cleverness. That construction, then, is best which sinks itself and is entirely unobtrusive, and moves quite silently and unnoticed under the truths of character and life which the dramatist has to present."

CHAPTER XI

DRAMATIC TECHNIQUE, II.

WHEN once you have the acts and climax, the curtains and scenes planned out, and your imagination full of your subject, let yourself go. Don't worry about rules any further, but shut yourself up and allow the characters write you the play. Keep going as long as the furnace of enthusiasm is red-hot, but stop the moment it begins to cool. One of the biggest financial and artistic successes in drama which drew audiences for months to a London theatre was written in six weeks. The younger Dumas wrote "*La Dame aux Camelias*" in eight days, and I have even heard of a play that was written in less time; but it survived only a few nights after production.

Each author has his own methods, but whilst it is essential that the work should not be hurried, there is a reason for spending considerable time over the preparation and then speaking the dia-

logue out and taking it down quickly. By this means, even if you have to delete much, the lines sound natural and there is no suggestion of bookishness, or the study. "What," once asked a leading playwright who has attained both reputation and wealth, "is the hall-mark of a dramatist?" And he answered his own question thus: "The sure sign of the dramatist is the instant presentation and revelation of character and action by means of bare dialogue. The dramatist makes his characters think, speak, act, live for themselves and their own ends. . . . In the drama you should never hear the author speaking."

Stage dialogue has much improved during the last twenty-five years. It has passed through the period of H. J. Byron when the pun was admired ; and through the artificial time of Oscar Wilde when the smart epigram was dragged in just for effect. Each of these devices was atrocious and we may be thankful we have progressed in the direction of fidelity to life. The stilted rhetoric and bombastic speeches of the eighteenth century are also banished for good, and the Victorian insincerities seem to us nowadays unbelievable that such lines could be written. Consider the paucity of technique and the intrusion of the author in the following rubbish by Bulwer Lytton : "Oh ! Clara, you know not

the tortures that I suffer hourly ! When others approach you—young—fair—rich—the sleek darlings of the world—I accuse you of your very beauty—I writhe beneath every smile that you bestow. No—speak not !—my heart has broken its silence, and you shall hear the rest.”

This ‘rest’ consists of about a dozen more lines of the same kind of twaddle, quite out of relation to life and utterly unactable. Contrast this with the dialogue of two lovers in Mr A. A. Milne’s play “*Mr Pim Passes By*” :

Brian. You babe ! I adore you. (He kisses her and holds her away from him and looks at her.) You know, you’re rather throwing yourself away on me. Do you mind ?

Dinah. Not a bit.

Or compare it with the conversation of lovers in Mr Monckton Hoffe’s “*The Faithful Heart*” :

Ango. . . . Do sit down.

Diana. I can’t stay long.

Ango. Look here, I’ve been having a heart to heart chat with your kinsmen.

Diana. What about ?

Ango. About our proposed engagement. On behalf of your family, they quite approve.

Diana. That’s very nice of them. Of course Waverley dear, you quite understand that I wouldn’t care tuppence if they didn’t ?

Ango. Dear girl, I’m sure of it. At the same

time the unsavoury subject of a settlement cropped up.

Diana. What about it ?

Ango. Well, dear, I do bar that.

The dialogue in plays to-day is brief, expressive and sincere. It is not enough to say that the dialogue of the Victorian dramatists merely reflected the ornate conversational insincere fashion of their time. This it certainly did, yet they took little trouble to idealise their material and the result is thoroughly inartistic.

Mr Avery Hopwood, who has written many plays that have spelt success both in New York and London, recently explained his methods of working. "I always do a detailed scenario of the action," he insisted, "and recommend it highly as a time-saver and a better-play maker. . . . Once the working scenario of the entire play is done, I prepare a scene scenario, that is an exact exposition of how the play will progress in relation to its characters and their dialogue, entrances and exits. That done, the easiest part of all for me is entered upon—the writing of the dialogue. That comes very swiftly and is much aided by the knowledge of the characters that I have obtained by working with them for a long time in preparing the scenarios. I should say that writing a play before a complete scenario is done—simply by delving right into the dia-

logue—would be an incredibly difficult, if not impossible, task if anything producible is expected to emanate out of the result. I find I have very little revision to do in the matter of dialogue."

And he adds this advice: "Get an interesting theme. Make an interesting story that doesn't let down until the very end. Fill the play full of whatever it's supposed to have—comedy—drama—tragedy—give the money's worth. . . . Get characters that the usual person wouldn't mind knowing in his own life, wouldn't be bored by, and make them just as few as possible—all you need for your plot and no more. Keep your sense of humour. Avoid filling your play with your pet theories of life and other things—they may interest you, but they wouldn't interest Broadway. Make your people talk like human beings and behave like human beings—all the time."

A play succeeds because it is human and interesting, and not necessarily because its characters belong to any one class. The play written by that promising young dramatist, the late Mr Stanley Houghton, and entitled "Hindle Wakes," showed how interesting a theme could be woven round even the lower middle-class people in a rough Lancashire setting. In Mr J. M. Synge's "Riders to the Sea" we have a moving tragedy with only poverty-stricken, primitive Irish fisher-folk as characters. Success in each case arose

from the way the playwright extracted the emotional interest. The persons were human and natural, they were concerned with big situations though their environment was humble and mean. Unless the artist can see what others are too blinded to recognise, there is no play ; but as the sculptor sees in the stone an angel and longs to let it out, so the dramatist consorting with apparently impossible people can perceive in their lives a drama, and is anxious to put it in a presentable form. The skill is in producing the friction, the explosion, the conflict—call it what you will—and compressing the characters to workable limits. Therefore prior to considering ordinary people dramatically, the artist must know how, and that means having technique at his fingers' ends.

Some writers see life in big situations, as for instance the French dramatist Bernstein, author of "Le Voleur," "Samson," and other well-known plays. His initial ideas are themselves great, and consequently they can be developed on a big scale. A strong man at variance with society, a wife who thieves and causes others to steal ; such themes have immense possibilities. Bernstein's first act of a play is usually the baldest kind of exposition, but he always provides one powerful scene with its terrific climax, as for example in the cross-examination, the un-

earthing of guilt and the confession during the second act of "Le Voleur." The last act is weak because the whole situation is in the second act, and similarly the second act of his "Israel" is the big idea of the play, and it achieves by reason of its suspense, surprise, simplicity and power.

Similar to Bernstein, because of his wonderful sense of the theatre, was that gifted dramatist Henri Bataille, whose death this spring was a great loss to his profession. Here we have an artist pure and simple. The medium in his case was of secondary consideration. Trained to be a painter, beginning his career as a poet, he became one of the first four dramatists contemporary in France. In February 1921 his last play "La Tendresse," a three-act comedy, was produced in Paris with the most brilliant success. Indeed it is rare that a play in any capital of the world ever is accorded such a reception. Frankly the subject is hardly suitable for a British audience, but we are concerned at present only with the technique of this play.

The attitude of this great artist to his work is worth studying. "The theatre," he wrote once, "is decidedly not the place to expose ideas; it must merely suggest them. Plays ought to have a theme somewhere, a philosophical underlying idea, just as clothes have well-concealed seams. . . . Ideas are for us a side-issue, the

main point is to give the spectator, through his senses, a more penetrating and more vivid view of life. . . . The personages of the play should act freely, according to their proper character, not according to the exigencies of the theme. They should carry on the play, not the play *them*." And again in his preface to "La Tendresse" he writes : " Le theatre, c'est la nature, c'est la vie elle-même. Les grandes sources originelles de la passion et du sentiment doivent en former la base. Je l'ai dit maintes fois, les fluctuations de l'esprit autour de ces lois immuables, voilà le theatre."

Bataille was not merely a dramatist in the sense of being able to conceive situations of profound emotional power, but his understanding of the sufferings of sensitive natures, his subtle analysis of feminine character enabled him to make "La Tendresse" a most human story. As a distinguished Parisian dramatic critic wrote of this play : " Ce n'est peut-être pas profondément moral, mais c'est profondément humain, et c'est pour cela que c'est profondément emouvant." In its technique we can learn much in regard to the composition and balance of material. Of the 177 pages, 33 are taken up with the exposition, 83 with the rising action (or struggle) to the climax, and the remaining 61 include the falling action and *dénouement*. The student of

this play will observe the craftsmanship of one very experienced and highly skilled in his work, evidence of most careful preparation before writing the dialogue.

Thus we see the play gradually increasing in strength as it proceeds, each 'scene' becoming more powerful emotionally than the last. In the big situations we see the effects which are obtained by preceding a tragic incident with a silence, or the lowering of the voice, and hesitation, before a confession. The waves and suspense of these emotional scenes are most compelling, and everything is carefully prepared for. Each character is vibrant with life, revealing itself in action and words, absolutely true to individuality, and amazingly consistent. Each 'scene' contrasts well with the one before, works up to its own separate climax and *dénouement* and then gives way to the next. The antecedent history of the characters is readily forthcoming in natural dialogue.

Bataille showed the value of silences in a significant situation, and gave an opportunity in this play for the actors to act, that is to co-operate with the author. Such matters as the telephone are used in the exposition but legitimately and help on the story. An impressive entrance is made more impressive still by the silence which precedes it, each scene is crisp and brisk, full of

movement and both suspense and struggle. The characters from their very first words reveal their nature in a manner distinct from each other. In short we have here in "La Tendresse" an embodiment of those technical rules which we have been considering. The reader will find it will well repay him to take any modern, successful high-class play, such as Mr Galsworthy's "Loyalties," and analyse it so that he can find out for himself illustrations in workmanship according to the rules already studied. Note that in these masterpieces they succeed because of, and not despite, their technical excellence. The order and arrangement have the added effect of greater emotional power to the story. The whole aim of discipline in life is to obtain greater efficiency, not to cause unnecessary irritation.

Find out what the public wants, by going to the theatre, and then aim to give them something a little better. A good old theme can be used again and again if only the dramatist knows how. "The young dramatists," wrote the American playwright, Charles Klein, author of "The Music Master," which had a phenomenal run in New York, "always put the same wrapper on their products. The theme of mother-love is invariably shown by the sick-child method, or the wayward son, or the harbouring of the outcast daughter against the wishes of the father,

and so on *ad nauseam*." You will find sometimes that what seemed a good idea will not work out to its successful conclusion. In that case, be honest and courageous. Throw the idea overboard, for it is nothing more than a notion : the trouble is that you have not begun with character, and you are trying to force characters to fit into the theme—which is one of the greatest heresies of imaginative literary work.

Remember that you need not expect to succeed except in your own special manner. It was said of Euripides that he was the most tragic of writers, of Molière that he was the most comic of comic writers, of Pinero that he is the most dramatic of all the present dramatists, and of Barrie you might say that he has the most delicate imagination of them all. The kind of play that you will write depends largely on what is in you, on how your temperament allows you to look at life. If you are a born dramatist and have a natural sense of the theatre, persevere with your study and go to the theatre regularly. Dissect and analyse, write and rewrite, be honest with yourself and keep a stout heart. Of two big successes recently, one play had been refused hastily by practically every manager and actor-manager in London for three years until it fell into acceptable hands. Another play by quite a different author had to live ten years before

it was accepted, but from the first night it was a veritable gold-mine and not merely was its success in London, but there was the keenest competition to obtain the American rights, and three touring companies were sent round the provinces simultaneously, while big audiences continued to flock into the London theatre. The moral is that if the play is really ‘the goods,’ don’t lose hope because so many men in the theatrical world have not the imagination to recognise what they want. Bide your time, and then have the felicity of seeing these gentlemen metaphorically kicking themselves to pieces at the end of the first night.

How does a dramatist get his plays accepted? I realise that this question has been uppermost in your mind some time, and it demands an answer. There are more ways than one to the theatre, so let us have a look. It has happened often that the most direct way is the most efficacious. An author has sent up his manuscript to the manager, who has been so pleased with it that he has produced the play on a royalty basis. In other cases, as for instance Miss Gertrude Jennings, a beginning has been made by writing one-act plays. But there is another indirect method, which has been found mutually satisfactory and is becoming rather a custom. Take the case of

an author who writes a very successful novel. Someone suggests that it will make an excellent play, but the author knows only little about dramatic technique. Often, be it admitted, in sheer arrogance he has the temerity to make a play out of his original story, but as soon as the theatrical people get the manuscript they realise that it is unactable. The author has undertaken a burden for which he is not fitted. His dialogue is too long, his scenes are not closely-knit, his exits and entrances are quite unskilful, and even the arrangement of the situations could be improved. What is to be done ?

The manager realises the immense success of the novel and hopes to obtain some of the reflected success in his theatre, but as it stands the play is amateurish and impossible ; so a collaborator is called in, who has already written a number of plays and understands stage-craft. As soon as he sets to work, he reconstructs the whole thing, and by the time he has finished, the title and the *motif* of the novel remain, but alterations and modifications have necessarily been permitted so extensively that the appearance is that of a new work. There are some cases when a novelist has the mind and the ability to dramatise, but this is by no means universal. However, during this time of collaboration, he

will have acquired a good deal of valuable technical knowledge, and his next single-handed attempt in the theatre should be successful.

There is also yet another method. Let it be granted that your play is good, and you have failed to persuade a single manager to produce it. There remains one of those producing societies which are out to give the play a chance on certain conditions, which you can easily find out for yourself. You may be asked to pay a certain sum towards production, but if it is very well received and the critics unite next morning in saying "this is the stuff," or words to that effect, sit down and wait till the telephone bell rings. Some theatrical capitalist will quickly begin bidding and before long it will find a home in a West-end theatre. If the first night there repeats its success, the provinces and New York, and maybe the Continent also, will want your play. After that, unless you lose your head and turn out inferiorities, your name is made and you should go from one achievement to another.

One word of warning is necessary regarding agents. As the law now stands, if an agent has once had your play in his hands, he can acquire a perpetual claim to percentage on whatever fees the dramatist draws from its presentation.

There are very few agents who can do more for an author than he can for himself in getting his play accepted. Some profess to have influence with managers, but it is important for the author to look out for himself, and if in doubt to consult the Society of Authors : there are some important clauses in any theatrical agreement which require their expert advice.

As it is important for an unknown dramatist to limit his scenery to what is not elaborate or costly, so he should limit his cast. A good rule is to have one set for the three acts and not to have more than seven characters in all. Providing the play is excellent, the manager can see that his initial and running expenses will not be great. Having once written your play, get it typed at an office accustomed to theatrical work, for this is a specialist's job.

As, presumably, you are a business man as well as an author, and look for remuneration of your work, you must study the market. It is no good writing costume plays if there is not a demand ; it is useless to turn out 'crook' plays on the American model when managers and the public want something else, nor weak imitations of Ibsen and Bernard Shaw. Think for yourself, go to life and make your own observation and selection ; give the public a sincere, genuine

heart-throbbing picture, old in theme but fresh in treatment, with laughs and tears and sentiment, and gripping situations. Offer them something which will make it worth their while to dine early and leave their second glass of port undrunk, or decline an invitation to a dance or to go away motoring this week-end. If you have learnt to know what interests your fellow humanity, and have acquired the art of presenting it, and further, have patience and courage and confidence, there is no reason why you should not succeed where others have failed. One of the world's most influential men, now dead, gave the secret of his life's success thus : Make up your mind what you want, then concentrate on attaining this.

He was not a literary man, but this advice is applicable to us. Many an author flounders about through his career, not certain of what he wants except a vague notion that he wants to 'get there,' the precise locality and direction being unknown to him, because he has not stopped to think. If you want to succeed as a story-writer, read the fiction that is accepted ; if you wish to become a playwright, go regularly to the theatre, keep your eyes open, compare your attempts with the methods of the masters ; but all the time never forget that observation

and sympathy come first, that technique is useless unless you have in you the right qualities for making proper use of it.

“The world’s a theatre, the earth’s a stage
Which God and nature do with actors fill.”

“Le theatre, c’est la nature, c’est la vie elle-même.”

CHAPTER XII

THE CINEMA PLAY

IN no section of creative production is the author of so little direct importance as in the film play ; or, to put it in a different manner, there is between his original manuscript and the story, as eventually it reaches the audience, an amazing, big gulf. In fact many an author has had difficulty in recognising on the screen the child of his imagination.

The film play is the youngest of the creative arts, and it has not yet settled down to that state of perfection which one day it is destined to reach. At the present moment the attitude toward the author is one rather of toleration than of welcome. He is looked upon as a necessary nuisance, and the result is that one gets so few photo plays that have really good plots. Many an author, tempted by handsome remuneration, has consented to allow his novel or his play to be produced as a film. The former has probably long since ceased to sell, and no longer has the

play possessed any commercial value ; the author, as a business man, appreciates the opportunity of an entirely new market. But when, at last, he sees the characters and situations on the screen, they have been so modified and so twisted about, compressed here and exaggerated there, that only little is left of what once was his. The cinema magnates, however, are realising their mistake, and the time is coming when the best imaginative authors will write for the play of the cinema as they do now for the play of the theatre.

There is such a widespread amount of ignorance on the subject of photo-play writing that it is necessary first to let the reader understand the processes through which the story must pass before it is seen on the screen. Some of the film firms are just crude, hard materialists, with little education and less taste. To them the author is of no value, except for his name, or the title of his work. Thus, if he is known as the writer of a certain successful novel or play, which has taken Europe and America by storm, they hope by using the same title by the same author to secure another success in respect to a story which does not necessarily follow closely the lines of the original. On the other hand it is only fair to add that even a successful novel may not make a good film ; and there are comparatively few novelists or playwrights who

have taken the trouble to find out what are the precise requirements of the cinema. And, so we get back to the old fallacy of endeavouring to achieve without studying either the special technique or the popular requirements of the market.

The best place to learn—as in the case of the drama—is in the house where such plays are presented. See for yourself what appeals to the public, and how. Then go home and try for yourself; come back and learn what you failed to appreciate, and keep on trying; but in the meantime this chapter will guide you into the right channels and keep you out of ways that are wrong. The main principles which have been enunciated in the previous chapters should first be assimilated. You will begin with character, you will observe the situations which evolve; you must have setting, climax, contrast and the rest. But that is not enough, and we shall look into this presently with an eye to greater detail. We must at present let the reader see just what happens to his manuscript, and so understand what are the obstacles that have to be overcome.

The photo-play consists either of a version of a novel or play; or it is an entirely new scenario written specially for the screen. It

is only within the last few years that an entirely 'dead' novel may be worth to an author anything from £500 upwards in return for the sale of cinema rights. It is better to sell outright, for it is not always possible, and usually very difficult, to collect royalties. How, for instance, are you to keep an eye on your story being pictured as far away as Valparaiso or Tokio? Moreover, between the day when the contract is signed, and the 'release' of the film to the public, two years at the very least may have elapsed. We will suppose, then, a perfectly imaginary case. I do not know if the title has been used before, but we can call your successful novel *The Wonder* for purposes of convenience. Some firm in Wardour Street, London, or maybe in the United States has paid you for the cinema rights of this popular story.

The producer now takes *The Wonder* in hand and looks at it from his own point of view, that is to say, he has no regard for you as an artist, nor for any of your fine feelings. He has paid cash for goods that can be woven into something quite different. That situation, where you let the hero meet the heroine by moonlight at the edge of the sylvan stream is not strong enough. It must be where a colossal waterfall comes bursting, tearing down;

and he must rescue her by day from the mighty torrent. The producer does not like the villainess. She is not enough of a vamp, and, further, the producer adds an entirely new character that you had never introduced into the story. Nor does he hold with the emphasis which you have attached to certain aspects of the story. Contrariwise he sees in one of your minor situations a fine chance for a spectacular effect, for violent sentimentality, and insists on the omission of a certain character you had put into the tale. And so, by the time the producer has adjusted *The Wonder* to suit his purpose, there is not much left of your first conception except in what is elementary, and the title.

The firm which bought the story from you probably has under contract a certain star artiste, and she has to be considered. More probably the firm is negotiating with a certain star, whose name is sure to attract the public, because her last film was such a financial success. This lady, however, is a little awkward to please. She does not quite like the heroine in *The Wonder*. It is not quite sympathetic enough, she does not wear enough smart frocks, she has not enough big scenes ; and so on. Why, she asks, did not the author do this and that ? At present the part is impossible. Therefore, as the lady is much desired, she must be

appeased, so it is agreed to alter the story to her tastes. The great game of author-baiting is now going strong, and the firm's editor has a chance to alter the story to his own ideas. The continuity writer, who breaks up the story into outdoor sections, indoor sections, and so on, must have his little say. He sees in the story too little action ; it is starving for thrills, so he gingers it up and introduces a great storm or a duel or an avalanche.

The Wonder is now ready for the director, whose job it is to see the written word turned into human expression. Just as in rehearsing a drama for the playhouse certain alterations have to be made, so here with the scenario which originated many stages back from your novel, further modifications have to be introduced. He is capable, as director, of giving your story a tone utterly at variance with what you created. You relied on delicacy, he wants strength ; you made the heroine a complex character not easy to define, but he wants her elemental in her personality, unambiguous, immediately comprehensible. Moreover, he must regroup your big scenes, and that great climax when she wrestled with her own temperament must come out altogether ; for when it comes to be enacted, it loses most of its effect.

And so the metamorphosis goes on. After

the film has been actually made, it is cut down because already it is far too long. The result is that we have totally inadequate motivation for some of the scenes, and the characters become mere puppets of the situation. But the story even now is not to be let alone. A smart, live, up-to-date caption-writer concentrates his attention on *The Wonder* and inserts 'subtitles' — witty, crude, sentimental — which are intended to make this motivation clear to the most somnolent picture-goer. The censors may not unnaturally object to the way one of the scenes has been mutilated and thus made revolting or objectionable. This very properly has to be cut. And, finally, when the materialists get together it is decided that what is wrong with the film is the title. *The Wonder* is of no value for attracting people into the exhibitors' electric palaces. It is not stunning enough and lacks punch; so this is scrapped and *Why She Sinned* is substituted instead. Then many months later, when you have forgotten all about your original novel, you may be on holiday at the seaside. It is a wet night, so you decide to go to 'the pictures' and learn 'why she sinned,' for lack of something better to do. To your horror you learn that it is 'after the celebrated novel *The Wonder*,' and all the niceties of your novel, all the subtle interplay of char-

acter, all the charm of the story have been taken away to get down to a standardised form of entertainment that must have a violent appeal.

The essential fact to remember in writing for the film is that the cinema is the so-called 'silent' drama. Not a word can be spoken. Unlike the play and the novel, there is not a word of dialogue, except for whatever may be indicated by a rare line inserted between scenes. Consequently, to convey character we have pantomime. Facial expression, gesture, attitude have all to be exaggerated ; and there must be a tremendous amount of action and change of situation to allow the plot to be manifest. There is a situation in one of the classic operas where the stage is occupied for half an hour by two characters only, who remain seated and sing, with practically no action. Such a situation could not be used in the film-play ; it would be unintelligible and meaningless.

The photo-play relies on drama in its fullest expression, and the author who writes scenes and situations in his novels which he has not fully visualised, is shown up at once. Cinema stories must be visualised in detail, they tell their theme by direct appeal through the eye in continuous action, without the aid of dialogue or the interpretative paragraphs which

the novelist brings in to help out the effect. If the characters are not doing things all the time, or if the interest is allowed to fall, then nothing can keep the public entertained with this film. The reader will recollect the importance of suspense insisted upon in a previous chapter; but in regard to cinema writing this element is the most important of the whole list of rules. Suspense is the connecting link which joins up the situations. It is the power which maintains the eagerness of the picture-goer to sit until the end. It is the bond between the author and his public, and around this eight-lettered word one could write a whole chapter. Get this fact gripped, then, with both hands: cinema spells suspense. Otherwise it is impossible to write photo-plays.

Suspense is tension, the dread lest something may happen. If you have made your character so attractive that the picture-goer, so to speak, takes him to her heart, you have been successful in the first stage. But you must know how to work suspense, how to extract its complete value; and this is the way. Having won for your hero sympathetic interest, next proceed to show by careful preparation an impending danger. Make this quite clear and unmistakable. Show the terrible height of the cliff, and the cruel rocks which exist at the foot; emphasise

what a hopeless predicament anyone would be in who fell over the side. Then, having got this picture clear, show the audience the situation of the villain—planning—endeavouring—almost succeeding, in hurling the hero over, until suddenly this is thwarted. The hero has been kept ignorant of this design, but the picture-goer knows, and almost wants to cry out and warn his friend on the screen. Suspense, you see, kept your audience in a state of expectancy ; and as long as you can do this right to the end of the story, you are working along the right lines of scenario-writing.

The novel of action is therefore far more suitable for filming than the novel of character ; and the more thoroughly the author has visualised his situations, the more likely is it to be bought by the cinema trade. The progressive, concerted series of actions leaving behind a unified whole ; the contrast in characters, situations, scenes ; these fundamental laws are as applicable to the screen drama as to the printed story or the playhouse production. Where the cinema fails is in delicacy. It is best with such a production as a Drury Lane melodrama ; it is worst with a modern light comedy of wit and daintiness. In writing a play for the theatre the author leaves enough scope for the actor's interpretation. In the script of a film there must be no

possible misunderstanding, and every movement and expression must be foreseen, mentally enacted and defined. There will always be a large body of novelists who will never succeed in film-writing any more than they will ever become playwrights, yet there will presently grow up a great demand for the photo-playwright, as soon as the cinema has settled down on right lines. You can spend half a million of money and thrill the public with amazing spectacular effects, but very soon they get satiated with this artificial kind of amusement. That which they always like and always will want is interesting stories about charming people located in the midst of interesting settings. The cinema theatre demands this, and as the taste of the public goes on improving, so there will have to be better constructed stories by film-dramatists rather than crude and inartistic, unbalanced adaptations of popular novels. Essentially the cinema public is the novel-reading or play-seeing public. The difference is only in class. The better-class cinema houses attract those who read if not Henry James, at any rate the novelists of the grade immediately below. The cheap houses have the same public who read the cheap novelettes and the cheapest detective stories; but they also attract that stratum of humanity which

never *reads* stories of any kind. Thus the film-play is all the time creating and educating a public that will eventually insist on the written word. Every publisher and bookseller to-day knows that one effect of the war was, whilst it lasted, not to kill the sale of books but to increase. Many hundreds learnt for the first time the joy of reading, adopted it as a habit, and kept it up ever since.

At the present period of development the author of a film story is in the hands of the producer and his satellites. When the really expert film-writer arises to meet the sympathetic and artistic producer, and both collaborate in harmony to give what you get to-day in a theatre play by Barrie, then there is no telling what the cinema will not do, because if it is deprived of dialogue it certainly has wonderful scope in other directions. The stage has the limitations of space, but the cinema is in that respect unbounded. It may take a whole page of a novel to show how beautiful the heroine is, whereas on the screen you see this in a flash. Unlike the novel and the play, its very lack of dialogue gives it an international language which everyone from almost a mere savage to a genius can understand. The language of pictures is as universal as humanity itself.

The director and his colleagues have obtained

this temporary ascendancy over the author because, in the early days of the film, stories and plays were selected with such little suitability for the screen that it was left to these gentlemen to make the narrative as coherent as was practicable. Thus the scenario became to him a mere framework for his own ideas. He became afflicted with what an American writer on this subject has termed "the itch for authorship." So also Mr W. Somerset Maugham, who is a novelist as well as one of the most successful of contemporary British dramatists (and, incidentally, one of the few playwrights who has ever had his plays running simultaneously in four London theatres), recently spent some time studying the relations in the United States between authorship and film production and made some interesting remarks in the *Times*.

"The director," he wrote, "is the person who on the legitimate stage is known as the producer, and here he has learnt on the whole that his duty is faithfully to interpret the author. But in the pictures his position is very different. He is an immensely influential personage. . . . I do not think there can be any real advance in the cinema till the director resigns himself to the position honourably occupied by his *confrère* of the spoken drama,

and is ready to be the interpreter, and nothing more of the author. . . . A man may be an eminent stockbroker, a Cabinet Minister, or a perfectly competent field-marshall, and yet, when he writes a play (which he generally does), he will give you the impression that he is a congenital idiot. . . . To write a sensible play or a probable story you need a certain capacity which is not shared by all and sundry."

The most likely scenario from the view of acceptance is that which makes the most universal appeal, which is applicable to residents in Alaska as in the Mile End Road. It must therefore, before all things, be strong in its human emotional appeal. It must exhibit devotion rather to bigger ideals than to narrow patriotism, and it must have ample sentiment. Deliberately the scenarist must provoke tears and laughter, the time must be to-day, the sympathy must not be with those who have lost luxury but with those who have known little else than hardship. But by way of contrast there must be beautiful dresses, lavish interiors, exotic flowers, beautiful furniture and gorgeous gardens by the contemplation of which the average picture-goer is taken out of his immediate, monotonous surroundings and given a mental as well as an emotional treat. On the principle that the higher you go the fewer, so the more demo-

cratic you make your appeal, the greater your success. And this can be done artistically if you use your technique properly. But, once more, let it be insisted that you must see picture-plays if you intend to write them ; for the character of the public is improving month by month.

The easiest entrance to the cinema, as to the theatre, is by the successful novel which has attained such popularity that there is competition to be allowed to have it dramatised and filmed. But supposing you are not one of the lucky novelists or dramatists ; what then ? The answer is this. Try and supply the great and increasing need of screen authors. Many certainly try, but they fail every time because the simple technique is not studied. In the previous paragraphs of this chapter we have been able to see the conditions which prevail in the newest of industries. Let us look more closely now into technical details as they affect the writer.

You need, obviously, a fertile mind, an imaginative brain, great power of vision. You must be able to think in pictures, to put down in lucid language what you see, and to know your public thoroughly. If you are writing round a 'star,' know what are that 'star's' suitable rôles. Remember that there are endless

ways of retelling the old stories. If you can't be original be unusual, whether you treat of the eternal triangle, the detective, romance, or the plain, simple love story.

The final test of your scenario is its story-telling value, which means its interest, which means arousing curiosity, which again boils down to suspense. Study the rules of construction as for the novel and the drama, then write out your rough scenario for private use. From this, instead of writing scenes of dialogue, you put down in the briefest words the action of the scene. Thus :—

SCENE 1

Drawing-room. Enter Charles. Walks irritably up and down the drawing-room. Picks up book from table and throws it down without looking at it. Walks up to window and looks out. Turns quickly as Melisande enters.

(Cut in on screen : "WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN MY HOUSE ?")

SCENE 2

Melisande orders him out, and opens door. Charles declines to leave. He endeavours to persuade her to be reasonable and to let him remain. She hesitates and finally he wins. She sits down in chair by

fireside but averts her attention from him.

In the above is set down on paper visualisation of actualities, something definite, something that the producer or director can request his artistes to act. It is action in picture, one thing at a time, clear and intelligible. The following is the way the inexperienced amateur is fond of writing his scenario :—

“ Melisande woke that day with a headache. She had an idea that something unpleasant was in store for her, and when her maid an hour later announced that Charles was in the drawing-room, she blushed with anger. ‘ What are you doing in my house ? ’ she exclaimed as she threw open the door and saw him turn quickly in his stride, etc. etc.”

This is the novelist, not the scenarist. For the cinema it is useless. It begins with Melisande in one scene, then passes on to the drawing-room, and the action is all mixed up. To carry this out correctly would mean :—Scene 1. Bedroom. Melisande is disinclined to get up. Raises hand to forehead. Scene 2. Drawing-room. Close-up of Charles. Scene 3. Bedroom. Maid enters. (Cut in with portion of con-

versation : " Mr Smith has called, madam.") Scene 4. Close-up of Melisande very angry and indignant. Scene 5. Drawing-room. Charles is walking up and down, etc. Scene 6. Drawing-room (as before). Enter Melisande full of anger.

Thus, in writing your scenario proper (as distinct from your private rough scenario) you must set down the result of your visualisation clearly, scene by scene, not generally but particularly ; so that it is comprehensible and actable. Continue in this fashion, show the entrances, exits, action, change of scene, and number them. These scenes may thus run into two or three hundred, but each must be the recording of some definite action. The producing of a film never takes place in the consecutive order in which it is written, for it may be desirable, for example, to photograph the garden scenes first, whilst the summer is at its height, and the interiors at some other time. The importance of numbering the scenes is therefore obvious. As to the use of the subtitle, the ideal film would be that in which the action is so clear that not a word has to be thrown on to the screen. At present, a good subtitle, used sparingly, is not only essential but increases the desired effect. This sub-title must be brief—every foot of film is valuable—to the point, and say what it has to say wittily and unconventionally. This does not mean cheap

vulgarism or slipshod English, but it does mean imaginative writing, and apt expression.

In addition to the detailed scenes, have also for convenience the numbers of the scenes tabulated : (a) Interiors, (b) Exteriors. It is thus possible to see at a glance which numbers come under each category. Further, provide a list of your characters, and when everything is typed, arrange your manuscript in the following way :

On the first page display the title of your story and your authorship. On the bottom right-hand corner add your name and address. On the second page repeat the title and give a synopsis of the story. On the third page give the list of principal characters and then the small parts and finally the 'extras,' such as waiters, servants, villagers. On the fourth page show the numbers and descriptions of the interiors and of the exteriors. And, having got all this neatly typewritten and fastened together, you are ready to try your fortune. There are plenty of film concerns in London who employ scenario editors for the purpose of doing for pictures what publishers do for books and editors for magazines and journals. And as in the publishing and journalistic world certain tastes exist, so there are good ideas which are unsuitable for certain cinema firms. Here again you must study your market. One firm

requires scenarios for certain particular stars, another firm is independent in this respect. One firm wants modern, romantic love stories with the scenes laid in the British Isles whilst others have no limitations.

The manuscript of your scenario may be declined for any of a dozen reasons as in the case of novels and short stories and plays. There may be a general slump in trade, the theme may be unsuitable, it may be too costly, or the decision may be a mistake. Against this one cannot advise. Five-reel plays are the most easily marketable, a 'reel' consisting of a thousand feet, containing from thirty to fifty scenes and occupying about a quarter of an hour to twenty minutes on the screen. A five-reel story should therefore last about an hour and a half when projected. The length of your synopsis should be about 400 words to the reel. In the subtitling not more than about ten per cent. of each reel should be used, as each word uses up about one foot of film. If you are writing a novel of incident or a humorous story, the remuneration from the cinema rights may run into big figures especially in the United States, and you may not even be asked to do more than hand over the book and allow the staff of the cinema firm to go ahead and interpret it as they wish.

CHAPTER XIII

SENSE AND SUCCESS

EVEN the most artistic and conscientious writer could not honestly deny that he was glad that his story or his play had become a great success and been bought by the public to such an extent that he was acclaimed in trade language as a ‘best-seller.’ If you should hear an author professing indifference to the sales of his books, his opinions should be listened to with suspicion.

Can an author by taking thought write deliberately what is to become a best-seller, or is it purely by chance that the novel has caught on? I suggest that if he writes with one eye on his royalties and another on his manuscript, his story will be a failure artistically and, ought to be, financially. At the same time it is essential to know your public, to realise what it is hungering for, and to supply what it wants in the right way. Well, then, what makes a best-seller; is there any formula?

I sincerely hope there is not. Writing would in that case become purely a matter of starting the human machine and running it for a certain number of hours, turning out so much produce each week. Writing is an art and is bound by the rules of art. It must be both spontaneous and flexible. At the same time there is all the difference between writing what is likely to sell and what is obviously unwanted. When once an author has been able to probe his public he can keep on giving them the same kind of story for a long time. In fact, if he switches on to another class, they express disappointment.

There are more women than men in this country, and in any case women are greater readers of fiction than men. Women love a love story, they are naturally curious and they insist on being entertained. Their imagination responds more sensitively to impressions, and they are immediately prepared to take sides with hero or heroine and to hate what you ask should be hated. Now, bearing all this in mind, it is obvious that domestic love stories, with strong plots, poignant situations, much suspense which carries the story right to the very end, continuous interest and with very human, frail characters—will certainly have a really large public if they once catch on. The people who read Meredith and Henry James are not those who read Charles Garvice

and Ethel M. Dell. But the sales of the last couple are immensely greater than the former, though it is a curious fact that since Mr Garvice died the enthusiasm for his numerous books has dropped.

So long as you make up your mind as to which class of reader you intend writing for, all well and good, but do not moan because high-brow novels have limited sales and simple domestic stories are not noticed by the reviewers except with scarcely concealed contempt. (Yes, Miss Smith, you're right; they're probably jealous.) It will have been already gathered from the preceding pages that a story or play whose central character is charming, who suffers because of his ideals but in the end is justified, has in it the makings of success. You are giving the public a chance of working it up into a big sale. A successful novel by one of the better-class authors will run into 20,000 or 25,000 copies in the British Isles alone. The sales of Mr A. S. M. Hutchinson's *If Winter Comes* have run by now into enormous figures, and every month sees them increase, so it is useless to put them down. In the United States about 122,000 copies were sold there within three months of publication. If an author has been able to obtain a hearing in both countries, he will find that generally speaking the American sales will be three times that of his books here,

because of the whirlwind methods of advertising and selling in the United States, and because of the enormous public. In England 3000 would be looked upon as an average success, 10,000 as a great success, 5000 as a satisfactory sale. In America a really popular novelist such as our British Miss Dell or Mr Hutchinson will reach 200,000 with comparative ease.

It is amazing to note how certain writers sell persistently and enormously. The American Mrs Gene Stratton-Porter writes stories of fresh air, full of colour, interest, movement, the song of birds and the love of nature. She began by writing nature articles, and in 1905 published her novel *Freckles*. Three publishers who read this story before publication advised her to "cut out the nature stuff." She declined to do so, and it became a best-seller. The sales of her novels have now reached over nine million copies. In England *Alf's Button*, a very light amusing story afterwards filmed with great success, sold over 100,000 copies. Compare these successes with those of the past. Wilkie Collins received £5000 for writing *Armadale*, though his *Woman in White* will be remembered much longer. The author of *The Vicar of Wakefield* left behind a packet of debts, George Eliot received £8000 for her novel *Middlemarch*, and Dickens at the height of his popularity was making £10,000 a

year from his books. The author of *Pilgrim's Progress* died a pauper ; Mrs Florence Barclay, author of *The Rosary*, died leaving over £33,000 ; Mrs Henry Wood, author of *East Lynne*, left £40,000.

To become a best-seller does not necessarily mean that your first book must be a veritable success. Few modern novelists have achieved such popularity as Miss Gertrude Page who recently died. She wrote several novels before one of them was accepted. One of the biggest financial successes for years was her *Paddy the Next Best Thing*, which brought her in considerable royalties as a novel. It was afterwards dramatised, and its run at the Savoy Theatre was so long that it beat all records there. It is therefore interesting to note how little the public is understood sometimes by those who are reputed to be experts. This very novel, which was the means of making fortunes for the author and others, was declined by publishers many times. *The Edge o' Beyond*, which was published in the same year, was produced also as a play at the Garrick Theatre and earned further remuneration by being filmed.

There are, however, many writers of serials whose names indicate big incomes though the libraries have none of their books, for the reason that none have been published. The readers

of certain journals and magazines, which appeal to a large public, know them well and welcome their stories. The editor and proprietors appreciate this fact, and the serial writer thus often makes far more out of his work than many high-class novelists. The serial story is to-day the backbone of so many papers that there is a demand for this kind of work. Not every novelist can get into this particular stride, and some even despise it. The only way to learn is to read through the pages of this book and then study for a month half a dozen of the serials which are running at the time in the various popular papers. The main fact to remember is that you are writing for a newspaper public, which has no time to waste on details but requires to be plunged into the midst of the story straight away. He or she asks for nothing subtle; just easily comprehensible well-marked characters who act out a sentimental story, with suspense and aroused curiosity maintained to the very end when the curtain descends on happiness. Serial writing is a craft rather than a great art, but the standard is rising with the improvement in the taste of the reading public.

One word in regard to style. Many an aspirant under the influence of certain books by well-known authors, sits down and writes what amounts to mere parodies of that author. This may

be consciously done or otherwise, but in any case it is wrong. Style is the personal expression of a writer, peculiar to himself. The best style for any author is that which is to him the most natural and springs from his character. Learn to think clearly and to put your thoughts down in the simplest words. Affectation in writing is as intolerable as it is in speaking. The only legitimate use of words is to convey ideas, and it is from practice that the author learns to employ the most suitable words that bring about the exact expression of his ideas. Write sincerely and as your sense dictates; be not a copyist even of the best, but a creative artist even of the lowest rank. Especially avoid banal journalese in your expressions, and hack phrases such as "happy hunting-ground," "soft impeachment," "he threw her a withering glance," "she drew herself up to her full height," "he little thought," and so on. Conceive the picture clearly in your mind, then depict it in your own words. If you have that indefinable personal magnetism, it will get through the printed word to your reader provided you aim only at truth and naturalness.

For your subjects go about with a mental sketch-book ready to receive impressions. There are some persons who have everything that money can purchase, yet they are never happy. There

are others who will never be rich but find life one glorious adventure, so full of interest that they would willingly live half a dozen existences. The difference is one of temperament. It is the same with an author. He who looks on life as a dreadful experience must expect to have a meagre sale of his stories, for he cannot help conveying a great sadness and pessimism. But most people have their own worries and griefs without paying for them in book form. There are some authors to whom everything in life is interesting, no experience is wasted. It is not the material that matters, but the treatment; not so much the things seen but the way in which they were beheld. To one person being in a crowd is most annoying, and every member an oppressive nuisance; to another it is the means of studying human character by contrast and learning to understand one's fellow-men. One writer can walk down a street and see nothing, for the reason that his eyes are looking for nothing; whilst another can see the humour and pathos of life at every step. Some authors actually adopt the literal precept of carrying a note-book and jotting down character ideas as they see them; and whatever methods you choose there must be some sort of accumulation going on from which you draw when the time comes for you to sit down and show life truly.

Write of the people and things which you understand thoroughly, and if you do not honestly feel you know certain phases, avoid them. Can anything be more grotesque than some of the American cinema conceptions of life in English country houses ? Recently a play by a Canadian produced in a London theatre was much criticised for the utter caricature of the manners of an English butler. It matters nothing at all that your story is founded on fact, but it matters everything that it reads as if it could have happened. Fine writing will never disguise poor ideas, but big ideas may manifest themselves in spite of weak technique, though much will be lost thereby. Truth is truth all the world over and in every age. You always admire a sincere person and distrust his opposite, and the story which rings true in spite of certain defects will have its readers. Try not so much to be original as to be true to what is credible. Unless an author understands himself, he cannot understand other characters. Analysis, without morbid introspection ; that keen inquisitiveness and love of humanity ; the longing to impart to others the pleasure which has been derived from an experience ; these are necessary to the would-be story-teller.

Have you not noticed among your friends how badly some describe their holiday abroad, and how well others will amuse you with far less im-

portant adventures ? Some after-dinner speakers increase the somnolence of their fellow-diners, while others will at once galvanise them into attention and interest. It is because some persons are born story-tellers, and find everything in life so entertaining that they cannot help passing on this pleasure to others for their own enjoyment. In gathering material for stories or plays you will find that an actual incident from real life, whether related by a friend or mentioned in the paper, is often a sufficient beginning. Let it develop in your brain, take it with you for a walk, think of it in your waking hours. It will need thoroughly overhauling and altering, but in it you may see the germ for your central situation, the big scene of your story, and you can work to and from it. Possibly in the end you will find that the one thing wrong with your scenario is that original germ. Never mind ; have the courage to throw it out ; it has done its duty and the whole story must be made flexible until it is entirely finished.

Big ideas, or big personalities, suggest big situations and rouse the deepest emotions, so it is well to start from this angle if you can. Similarly it is far easier to make a story about an unusual character than about one that is just ordinary ; for unusual and curious situations will follow naturally. The only guide must then

be to realise what would this unusual character naturally do under the circumstances in which you have placed him. The central idea of a judge finding in the course of a murder trial that he was inadvertently the person who killed the dead man might possibly work out into a fine detective story. It would require building up and careful thinking out, and the mystery would have to be maintained to the last. Quite possibly you might have to let the judge die on the last page, but before that everyone else in the story would have had to be suspected. In many modern short stories the central idea is of the slightest but the treatment is so good, the setting and atmosphere and characters are all so well observed that the simplicity in one direction is amply made up in another. To choose a slender theme and build it up into a big story is the work of a real artist, but the aspirant will find it better to begin with a bolder idea.

There will always be a market for stories of love, humour and adventure. Find out where your own real ability lies and then specialise; you cannot expect to succeed in every section of literature and it is no good to try. Your own result of living in this world has surely given you a certain attitude towards life, its principles, its meaning, its seriousness, its humour. There must be some way of looking at it that you have

made your own. Very well, then, start from this standpoint and set it down. If you have simply passed through the years without receiving impressions, without gaining some sort of personal philosophy, without learning the inner meaning of things ; then the work of creative literature is not for you. Probably you will be better employed in routine work or bargaining over the counter of commerce, or doing big deals with unemotional men. Not for you is the pleasant task of sharing impressions with others.

There can never be a factory for producing imaginative writers who enter at one door as dullards and emerge as novelists or playwrights. The most that can be attempted is to say to those of certain requisite endowments, these are the lines along which your technical education should proceed. All the rules that are provided are intended less to be followed strictly than as general guiding principles embodying ideas. You cannot train up a child with the certainty that he will become a Shakespeare, a Dickens or a Wagner ; but you can see in him certain aspirations towards the fine things in life, certain susceptibilities, and these can be trained. It will save him wasting years of his life and making a series of fruitless mistakes, it will give him a means of expressing all that is noblest in him. Incidentally the mental discipline and restraint, the exercise in good judg-

ment and the acquisition of sound taste will all be invaluable towards attaining the one great end. There can be no short cuts. He who has not suffered cannot sympathise with the sufferings of others, still less excite his readers to sympathy. He who has not loved can never write a strong scene between two lovers.

And when you have begun to write and have actually created some story, if you do not feel satisfied with your own judgment, avoid asking the opinion of your friends. That is the last quarter to which your attempts should be sent for criticism. If they are really friends they may lack the moral courage to tell you their genuine disappointment, or even if the story is good, they may know you too well to appreciate its full value. You want an outside, totally independent opinion, and that you will get in the open market. Let that be a sufficient criticism of your work. Do not imagine that every editor, publisher and theatrical manager and producer of films is a fool or a knave. Some, I grant you, may be one or the other; it is conceivable that in this world of sorrow some may be both. That is not your concern. There is a demand for good fiction, and these capitalists are on the look-out for a supply. If you can deliver the goods, there is a fairly free trade if only you will study what is wanted and

not be dismayed by failure at the first few attempts.

At first don't be afraid to revise and even rewrite ; for all the time you will be learning a good deal, and especially economy in words. Don't try and make yourself write if you are not in the humour. Forced literary work is like certain kinds of forced vegetables ; it lacks flavour. The longer you spend on working out your preliminaries such as the biographical details of your characters, and the sequence of scenes, the easier it will be to write the story and play. Conversely, unless you have got all these absolutely clear before you begin, you will find your work being hampered, your thoughts being distracted from the immediate situation, and an absence of natural flowing narrative. You will certainly be guilty of inconsistencies somewhere, and the white heat of enthusiasm will begin to cool off.

After the first few chapters have been written you may begin to despair and wonder whether you were wise in tackling such a big job as a novel. In this case put the manuscript aside for a while. If, when you read it through a few days later, you feel yourself still keenly interested in the persons and still thrilled by the situations, pluck up your courage and attack with a new zest. But if you still feel that the

story is working out wrongly, it may be well to investigate the cause. Probably—I do not say certainly—the cause of the trouble will be found to lie in the fact that you have allowed yourself to intrude too much, and not kept the characters adequately visualised. The dialogue in consequence is weak and unconvincing, the characters are not yet full of life.

If this is so, then there is nothing for it but to begin again, though the time spent will be not altogether wasted for it will make the preparation less hard this time. If you have begun with theme instead of character, if you have been so fascinated by a certain situation that you have forgotten the characters in that scene, then you must face the inevitable and add the breath of life. One of the modern effects of civilisation has been gradually to straighten out national distinctions and class distinctions. The result is that nowadays a story or play which appeals to one set of people will be appreciated by a much larger number of persons than hitherto. The influence of common cause, the acceleration of all forms of transport, the universality of the printing-press, have been the means, together with the telegraph, of levelling up to a common standard. If, therefore, you once understand people as a mass rather than as individual communities, you have advanced a long way on the

road which leads to success. It is very rare, for instance, that a theatrical success in London does not soon repeat its experience on Broadway. If America becomes enthusiastic over some new book, England wants to have the chance of reading and judging its merits. Still more so is this the case with the cinema. The rule, of course, is not absolute, and the divergence is often because the setting is too localised to interest other peoples (as for instance in the American novel *Main Street*) or the mode of thought is more prudish (as in our national attitude to certain French plays).

To sum up, then, and to recapitulate: the literary artist must begin with a certain essential endowment before he is competent to devote himself to imaginative writing. But this being conceded, he will find the basic rules of all art invaluable and indispensable, and thence he can proceed to acquire knowledge of the rules which apply to his own particular study. No one who has taken the trouble to read through these pages can assert that the rules are difficult or in any way unreasonable. The novel and the play have become such enormous forces in life quite apart from the æsthetic pleasure that they afford. The artist invites us to look at life as he has seen it and to say "Is this not true? Have you ever considered

the results of a certain line of action which I present ? ”

The audience and the reader reply that the picture presented is true and probable, that the proposition put forward is a possibility they had not yet contemplated ; and in the enjoyment of your work they have also acquired a body of new knowledge which is to be of practicable worth in the course of their social experience. Some cynics never weary of asking “ What is the good of art ? ” This is the answer ; and every artist deserving of the name is entitled to take a legitimate pride in his achievement towards the world’s good.

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1922



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